Wanderer

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Summary: Disgraced and ashamed, Alain drifts in self-imposed exile in the wake of a personal failure. But not all those who wander are lost, and those who listen may find something they never knew they were searching for. [Realistic Pokemon AU, post-Mega Evolution Specials]

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1. Chapter 1

Wanderer
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon
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Notes: This is a short giftfic for the wonderful Xxser3ndipityxX, who has been a source of constant support and enthusiasm as I sink deeper into the world of Realistic Pokémon AU fanfic. It was supposed to be a one-shot, but I got so into the story that it turned out longer, big surprise. I also give her credit for making me get off my lazy butt to find a way to incorporate Mega Evolution into the Realistic Pokémon AU I've created. Thank you, and I hope you enjoy this fic and my spin on the characters.

***If you are new to my Pokémon fics, check out the very short note in my profile about Tamers, what they are, why I decided to incorporate them, and how they fit into my interpretation of a Realistic Pokémon world.

"*Not all those who wander are lost." - JRR Tolkien*

Numb.

When you have your life planned out for you, from the shirt you'll wear that morning to the way you hold your fork to the person you'll be when you grow up, there's not much else worth feeling. Monotony deserves no attention other than the pretense of it—eyes open, a nod here and there, go where you're told. It'll all be okay. You're going to do great.

"*You're going to be great one day."*

Ten years old and Serena could hardly picture what great would feel like. One day. Someday. Days were all the same, one after another. What was the difference?

Today was the difference.

Today, she would pick her own shirt and she wouldn't use a fork. Today would be a great day. Today, she would run away. Run away to a place even her mother couldn't follow with her facial wipes and

snap-ready tongue and vicarious dreams.

That's a big word, vicarious. Serena heard her father use it with her mother once, the day *he* left. Her mother, Grace, did a lot of things vicariously. She loved vicariously, which sounded like a good thing—a *great* thing, today is a *great* day—to Serena's ears at the time. But it wasn't good enough for her father, and he took his bolero and his briefcase and he slung his suit jacket over his shoulder to go to work, and he never came back.

If he could do it, so could Serena. She didn't have a briefcase, but she had a pink backpack with a Cleffa design embroidered into the top flap. She didn't have any hats, least of all boleros, but she'd seen them in the shop windows in Lumiose City, pinks and purples and yellows and browns, when her mother would take her to town and set her up with a daycare service while she competed in the regional Rhyhorn racing competition. Her mother was always racing—in the arena, washing the dishes, kissing Serena goodbye when she went to school. Never a slow moment, never time to breathe. Never time to listen to Serena's answer when she asked her young daughter a question.

Numb.

Just be numb, Mom will take care of the rest, anyway. You don't have to ask. You don't have to think.

Serena had a jacket, a light winter coat that was her favorite color, a soft, baby blue, just like her eyes. It had a hood, too, so even if she couldn't have a hat like the ones in the window in Lumiose, she could keep her hair dry if it rained. The next step was food. She wasn't dumb, food didn't grow on trees! Well, maybe it did, but she wouldn't know it if she saw it. Convinced, she headed downstairs to the kitchen. It was late, past her bedtime, and her mom was in the living room with the TV on and a glass of red wine. That meant she'd be too distracted to hear Serena rummaging around in the cupboards and the fridge, grabbing fruit and candy bars—she liked the sweet stuff—and just because she felt guilty, the bag of granola that was kind of sweet but fake sweet to cover up the healthy bits. She packed it all in her little pink Cleffa-print backpack and zipped it back up.

Then she went back upstairs because she wasn't stupid. The front door would alert her mom, and she wasn't supposed to be out of bed so late. But her room had a window, and that window opened up onto a sloping, shingled roof. And the edge of the roof was just close enough to a tree with thick branches that she could easily climb down, even

with her pink Cleffa-print backpack on. She'd done it before. Tree climbing was fun because her mom couldn't do it, or wouldn't. No one followed her up a tree.

Serena had her jacket and her backpack and her yellow rubber boots, and she opened the window as slowly as she could. It still squeaked, and for a couple seconds she knew she was busted. But her mom didn't call out, shrill and suspicious like she usually would. Just silence and the low, distant hum of the TV in the living room.

Safe.

Serena opened the window the rest of the way and climbed out, down the awning, and onto the tree. She cast a last look back at her room. The night-light was on—she didn't turn on the regular lights because she wasn't *stupid*. It was one of those spinning ones with Pokémon shapes cut into the metal so the light would project their images on the wall and ceiling. Smiling Wailord, bouncing Spoink, singing Fletchling. She smiled and wished she could take the light with her, but there weren't any outlets in the woods. *Duh.*

She did have a flashlight, though. Her father had given it to her before he left, to find her way in the dark to wherever she wanted to go. It was small and yellow, like her boots, but she'd put in fresh batteries so she knew it would shine bright. Clutching it between her teeth, Serena nimbly climbed down the tree to the ground quick as an Aipom and just as quiet. Still no sign that her mom knew what she'd done.

Vaniville town was a small, sleepy place. She didn't mind it, preferring the quiet to the large, bustling chaos of city life, like when her mother took her to Lumiose every so often. But there was something about small towns that was louder than the big cities. People whispered here, all the time, to the point that all Serena ever heard were whispers, voices on top of voices, and shifty eyes. She got that creepy-crawly feeling like people were talking about her as she sat by herself at playtime and squished silly putty between her fingers until it burst, or about the kid sitting next to her in class who picked his nose, or about the dumpy teacher who wore the same outfit four days in a row and she was starting to smell. Creepy-crawly whispers that sank their little fish hooks into your ears and pulled, soft and slow so you wouldn't notice the ripped skin and the trickling blood under the hook.

There were no whispers in the woods, and to the woods she went. Vaniville was surrounded by woods, deep and dark and lovely. She'd

always liked the woods, Serena. Looking into something that looked back at her, watching as she watched. Like a secret friendship that never expected anything, never demanded something in return. Quiet. She liked quiet. It was easier to reach out and feel something when there was no one telling her what to do, where to go. No little fish hooks in her ears pulling her this way and that way.

The woods opened their arms to her as if welcoming an old friend, she liked to think. It was so easy to step inside, leave her house and the town behind. Daring to smile, to laugh a little, she picked up speed and ran, jumping over roots and ducking branches. Thistle bushes scraped her legs, but her pants kept her from bleeding and she didn't mind, besides. This was *freedom.* The night air, the sap and the honey and moss and the musky, dank, loamy smell that was the essence of the forest. This was home, she was sure of it.

Panting and out of breath, she slowed to a stop and leaned her weight on her knees to catch her breath. The moon cut through the canopy overhead and offered some light, but Serena turned on her flashlight to help her see better. As soon as the beam flashed to life, something in the underbrush shied away and hid in the bushes.

"Hello," Serena said, tiptoeing to where she'd seen the movement. "I won't hurt you."

She checked the bushes, but there was no sign of whatever had been hiding there. A little disappointed, Serena stood up and looked around. It sure was dark in here...

Maybe if she just stuck closer to the edge of the woods. That way, she could go back if she wanted, if just to look at her house or the people walking around town. She wouldn't call out to them—she'd run away, that was the first rule, of course—but just to see them. Was it this way? She started walking in the direction she thought she'd come from, but after a few minutes, the woods were as thick and dark as they'd been before. Maybe she'd gone the wrong way. Turning around, she went left this time. But the woods were unchanging, thick and dark and labyrinthine. Was she going in deeper without knowing it?

Her throat clenched with the beginnings of a sob, but she refused to cry. No way, she'd come out here on her own. Nobody told her to, just her. She was here to stay, right? To run away? Then who cared if she couldn't find her way back to town? It was just trees out here, and the leaves, and the moss, and—

Something growled to her right, and Serena whipped around and clutched her flashlight with both hands like a laser that might melt whatever got caught up in its beam. There was no sign of anything in the underbrush. No movement, no reflection of eyes, nothing.

"Wh-Who's there?" she said, voice shaking.

Another growl rumbled somewhere to her left, behind her this time, and she whipped around again. Her yellow flashlight trembled in her hands, the beam shaking and making it hard to see through the gloom.

"H-Hello?"

Something shone in the corner of her eye, and she spun again. Eyes, like two mirrors that reflected her flashlight and blinded her momentarily. Squinting, she tried to make them out better. Not just two, but four. Then six. Ten. A pack of them, glowing red eyes that caught the light and reflected it back at her, impervious to the flashlight's magic. Fear began as a cold draft against the back of Serena's neck and spread down her spine even through her warm jacket. Try as she might, her grip would not remain steady and her flashlight shook ever harder. She took a step back, then another and another.

The eyes followed.

"No, stay away!"

One of them growled, this time more confident, and it lunged. Serena screamed and took off running in the only direction that made sense right now: away. Tears blurred her vision, and her flashlight plunged her into a strobe-lit world of light, dark, light, dark as she pumped her arms and waved the flashlight around. The growling grew louder, and the pack broke out into a run as they hunted her, barking.

"Leave me alone!"

But Serena's desperate pleas fell upon deaf ears as the pack of canines, hungry and better at seeing in the dark than she could, gnashed at her heels and drove her deeper and deeper into the forest. In her hysteria, she tripped over a gnarled tree root she hadn't seen in time and fell flat on her face. Her cheek stung, scraped up and bleeding, and her flashlight tumbled out of her hand. But there was no time to cry or scavenge the flashlight because the hounds were coming. Sobbing, Serena picked herself up and ran, now guided only by the light of the

moon.

Stupid, stupid, stupid! She was so stupid. She'd planned it all out, but she never imagined she'd be mistaken for food. People weren't food, right? The salivating canines at her heels begged to differ, and for the first time in her life, she got a taste of real fear and it got a taste of her.

Something sharp closed around her calf, and she screamed. A bold Poochyena, perhaps the alpha of the pack, had broken off from the rest of the pack and run her down so it could sink its teeth into her first. Grunting in pain and eyes full of tears, Serena fell and caught herself on her hands. She flipped as best she could, but the pain in her calf was a zillion times worse than that time she cut her hand on an exacto knife helping her mom open up the moving boxes when they first got to Vaniville. Poochyena wasn't letting go, though, and she did the only thing her body knew to do: she kicked the pup.

Hard in the face, and her boots were hard rubber, too. Poochyena whined in pain, and she kicked it again, screaming as she felt its small teeth rip her flesh. The third kick shook it loose from her leg, and it turned tail and retreated, whining in pain where she'd smashed its head up good. Whimpering, Serena staggered to her feet and limped as fast as she could forward. Forward to where, she had no clue, but the Poochyena outnumbered her ten to one and she had to do something. No one was here to tell her what to do or where to go, no rot-rusted fish hooks in her ears to pull her this way and that, she was on her own.

The barking drew closer, faster and faster, and she reached for the thick vines ahead. They parted under her skinny arms and she fell forward. The ground dropped off and she kept going, tumbling over herself too fast and hard to cry out. She rolled over moss-covered rocks, dead branches, crunchy leaves, all wanting a piece of her as they bruised and battered her limp body.

She landed at the bottom of the hill with a thud and groaned, her whole body like one giant bruise and her leg still bleeding. But the barking followed her down, and the fear came alive within her heart once again. Terrified and weeping, Serena struggled to stand and limped forward, away from the advancing Poochyena, as fast as her little legs could carry her.

They drew closer, so close she was sure they were just playing with her, a game of tag that she would lose no matter what she did. A child

discovering her own mortality is equally the most disappointing and the most horrific thing in the world. One minute she's invincible, the next she's the same as everybody else. Nothing special about her. Perhaps that is the saddest part, more than the dying.

Just ahead the trees and underbrush thinned, and Serena followed the pale moonlight toward the clearing. Something brushed her heel, the Poochyena perhaps taking another snap at her. Desperate to get to safety, she flung herself through the last mass of underbrush and into the clearing, where she skidded over the grass and mulch and stained her pretty, blue coat. Exhausted, shaking with fear, and in more pain than she'd been in all her life, she curled in on herself and waited to die.

The barking canines descended, but just as she squeezed her eyes shut and waited for the inevitable, it never came. Barking turned to shrill whining, and the dogs scrambled over each other to turn back the way they'd come in a hurry. Their cries grew fainter, and Serena still felt the throb in her leg. She couldn't be dead, right? Her mom told her that when Grandma Penelope died, she didn't feel any pain. So if Serena felt pain now, it had to mean she wasn't dead yet. But...why?

Cautiously, she opened her eyes and peered around. There was no immediate sign of the Poochyena that had chased her here, wherever here was. Gasping from the pain, she nonetheless pushed herself up into a sitting position and wiped the tears from her eyes and cheeks, more curious now than afraid.

She was in a clearing bisected by a wide but shallow stream. Its bubbling passage had a soothing effect even after the harrowing experience of getting here, and in the moonlight the water shined a deep, sapphire blue, crystal clear. The clearing stretched a long way, maybe five hundred yards, and no trees grew here in the lush, green grasses. Save for one.

One lone tree, thicker than the ones she'd seen running here and with many reaching, bent branches, sat on one side of the stream surrounded by moonflowers, pale and white and smiling as they bathed in the unobstructed moonlight. The tree's branches, though, were bare and white as alabaster, spindly as an old woman's fingers clutched in prayer. Eerie, but beautiful.

Serena crawled toward the odd tree, eyes wide and reflecting the moonlight just like the moonflowers around her. It seemed to hum, the tree. Or was that the wind? Now that she took a moment to

breathe with her fears subsided, she realized how quiet it was here. Just the babbling stream, the light breeze in the grass, and the lonely tree that watched over them all.

Beautiful butterfly Pokémon perched on almost every empty space on the bare branches where flowers should have been. Vivillon in greens and violets and yellows and blues, their wings sparkling in the moonlight. Beautifly, their long tongues curling and uncurling as they cleaned themselves. Butterfree sleeping in clusters that resembled enormous, silver suns. Serena forgot her pain for a moment as she stared, awed as she'd never been before. Like magic. They paid her no mind.

So pretty...

But her leg still hurt and bled. She didn't know anything about first aid, but when she got that cut from the exacto knife, she remembered her mom washed it out with warm water and bandaged it so it wouldn't bleed anymore. Serena didn't bring any band aids, but there was at least water here. So she limped to the shore at the base of the tree, pulled off her yellow boot, and rolled up her pants. The bite was bad in her ten-year-old eyes, ugly and red and painful. Biting her lip, she dunked her leg in the stream and shivered at the cold. But the waters washed the wound clean, and she watched, a little mesmerized, as her blood diluted in the crystalline waters until it was no longer discernible. When she couldn't stand the cold any longer, she bravely forced herself to keep her leg submerged for another thirty seconds, then got out of the water. The bleeding had slowed to nothing more than a lazy trickle, so she rolled down her pant leg and pulled her boot back on. It still hurt, but the cold numbed it enough to deal with. She hoped it would be enough.

As she scooted back from the water's edge, something caught her ear over the pleasant bubbling of the stream. A cry, faint but noticeable if she stilled to listen, reached her ears. Startled and a little curious, Serena got up and rested some of her weight on the weird tree to walk better. The cry was coming from somewhere behind the tree, so she limped around the back of it. There was a shallow ditch behind the tree overgrown with grass, and in it lay a tiny creature, the source of the wailing.

"Oh," Serena said, momentarily forgetting her own plight as she focused on the little bird stranded at her feet.

It was small, no bigger than her two hands cupped together, but its

fat, fluffy wings were twice the size of its powder blue body. Blue like the sky on a clear day, her favorite color. Its fluffy wings were white, kind of like someone had stuck a bunch of marshmallows on a stick until they smushed together. The feathers were thick and downy, awkward for the tiny creature's size. And its dark eyes were full of fear as it cried for its mother.

"Swablu?"

Serena thought she recognized the species from her classes. They were a rare Pokémon and weak as Torchick, easily targeted by larger birds like Pidgeotto or Fletchinder. This one was alone and scared, just like her. Emboldened, she kneeled down on her good leg and hunched over to get a better look.

"Hello, I'm Serena."

The Swablu chick chirped and chirped, terrified and shaking. She looked up, but there was no sign of its nest anywhere. It must have a nest somewhere. Maybe it had fallen and waddled into this ditch, unable to get out. Her shoulders fell. If that was the case, then maybe it had waddled a long way here, and then she'd never find its nest in the dark.

Swablu chirped and attempted to waddle out of the ditch, but the incline was causing it problems. Unthinking, Serena reached for it and earned herself a nip on the thumb.

"Ouch!"

She sucked on her abused thumb, and the Swablu stared up at her with its dark eyes, suddenly quiet as though she'd spooked it as much as it had spooked her. As much as her thumb hurt, it was nothing compared to the wounds on her leg from the wild Poochyena. Serena lowered her hand and cautiously reached out to Swablu again.

"It's okay, I can help you get outta that ditch. See?" She pointed to her leg. "I got hurt, too. Maybe... Maybe we can keep each other company?"

Swablu chirped again, dark eyes trained on her slowly encroaching hand, but it didn't lash out this time. Holding her breath, Serena gingerly touched Swablu's wing with her fingers, and it didn't try to bite her. A rush of elation the likes of which she'd hardly ever known swept through her, elemental. She smiled brightly, never having experienced such a simple, easy joy as making contact with a

Pokémon that was just as afraid of her as she was of it. Discovering there was nothing to be afraid of. Swablu chirped again and waddled closer to her hand, and it was then that she felt it shaking with cold. It was a chilly night, not so bad with her jacket, but Swablu didn't have its own raincoat to keep it warm. Serena leaned over and scooped up Swablu in her hands and brought it to her chest. She unzipped her raincoat and swaddled the fledgling among the flaps, easing it into a cocoon. The little bluebird cooed, exhausted from the constant overload of fear and cold and solitude. Such a small thing...

"Can I keep you?" Serena whispered as she cradled the little bird.

She'd never kept anything before, not anything that mattered. Things were given to her. Her Cleffa-print backpack, the blue jacket, her yellow rubber boots, everything. She'd never found anything on her own that her mom would let her keep. But her mom wasn't here.

Swablu snuggled deeper into her arms, trusting. Serena smiled.

"I'll keep you safe, I promise." She meant it. "Forever and ever."

She leaned back and lay against the weird tree, finding it comfortable enough once she shrugged off her backpack and set it beside her. The moon flowers twinkled all around her, little nightlights to make up for the one she'd left behind in her room. And the butterflies above were the shapes that gave the moonlight life, dancing and fluttering and lulling her to sleep.

Scared and alone and hurt in the woods, far from everything she knew, Serena fell into a slumber deeper than any she'd ever had before. Here in the woods, under the branches that didn't blossom, in a field of pale flowers, with a tiny Swablu in her arms. Vulnerable to the cynical eye, but at peace.

She dreamed that night of her own mad flight through the forest. Except this time, the Poochyena were twice her size with teeth like knives and much, much faster. They chased her to the clearing again, but this time she fell over the edge of the world, only darkness below. A waterfall sprayed over the edge, and she reached for the falling water with her hand, so tiny and so helpless, and it didn't save her.

She landed at the foot of the tree, or at least, where the tree had been. The stream still rushed past her head, clear as day under the moonlight, but the butterflies were gone. The flowers were closed up tight. There was no light here, and she was alone.

That's okay, she thought. *I don't mind...being alone.*

She wasn't really alone. The moon was here. The stream whispered its secrets as it rushed past. Even the grass, if you listened, had its secrets to tell. Everything had a story. Everyone had a beginning. She was at her beginning, and the pain from the fall was merely ancillary to the fact.

Rolling over, Serena rubbed her eyes and looked around the dreamscape. Without the weird tree, the clearing was barren and lonely. She struggled to stand up and look around. Maybe she was in the wrong place, maybe she'd fallen too far. No, this was the right place. This was where she was, where she was supposed to be. That was her, sleeping there.

Gasping, she covered her mouth and looked down at the form of her sleeping self, hunched over and cradling something precious in her pale fingers, too white to be human any longer. Swablu, she remembered. She'd saved that Swablu from the cold.

Rustling in the grass behind her. Serena whipped around, her short, honey hair brushing her cheeks. There was the weird tree, just as she remembered it. Except not as she remembered it. It didn't move the last time she saw it. Moving toward her. Blue, like the sky, her favorite color...

What are you? she wanted to ask.

But why ask when there was no need to know? The tree, its branches golden like the sun and plated with rainbows, crept closer to her on slender legs. It could see her. Its eyes were kind, she wanted to think. Or maybe that was what it wanted her to see. Dark eyes that reflected every color imaginable, a prism in the sunlight. She stared, mesmerized.

"What do you want?" she heard her voice ask.

"I want you to listen."

Serena was listening, what else would she be doing? But the blue tree with the gold crown woven from leafless branches lowered its head.

"Listen to the life you gave yours to save."

Serena's mouth fell open, understanding somewhere in the darkest corner of her ten-year-old mind. She spun around, the fear returning,

and spotted herself still curled up with Swablu, unmoving. Her pant leg was dark with blood, and it stained the grass and the moonflowers around her in a huge puddle, reflecting the moonlight in their stead. Tears stung her eyes.

What's going on? Whatsgoingon?!

But the breeze caressed her cheek and bade her look back. The tree, not a tree at all, stood just inches before her, its slender, flat face lowered to hers and its dark eyes deep with understanding.

"Listen,"it said again.

Serena choked on a sob and wiped her nose, afraid, but she wasn't stupid. Whatever it wanted, it would get it. She knew when to go numb after years of practice. So she closed her eyes and did her best to listen, really listen. Something cold pressed against her forehead, and she blinked up at the blue creature. It had kissed her gently, its soft command lingering—

"*Listen."*

But there's only so much you can expect of a ten-year-old girl who's run away from home, been attacked and fatally wounded, and left to find peace in the heart of a darkness that has nothing to do with her. Serena's eyes drooped, and she felt herself falling back. Dark eyes watched her, that golden crown beautiful like it had invented the term and shining down on her. Beautiful, and horrifying.

How often the two go hand in hand.

But these are thoughts no ten-year-old would ever bother with.

She fell back, and maybe she screamed, maybe she didn't. It made no difference. When she hit the ground, she was no longer falling, and the moon was no longer bright in her eyes. Something warm and soft squirmed in her arms, and shaking the last vestiges of sleep from her consciousness, Serena blinked blearily and yawned.

Swablu was curled up in her arms and chirping again. This time its dark eyes were trained on hers without fear, and its tiny beak hung open in between chirps, as if to suck in another breath and prepare for the next howling before it finished the last.

Serena rubbed her eyes with her sleeve and stretched out. It was then that she noticed something very wrong. Shifting, she bent over her left

leg, which had been bitten and ripped up last night by the Poochyena chasing her. Today, there was no sign of any injury whatsoever. The holes in her pants remained, but her calf was intact as though nothing had pierced it. There wasn't even a scar. Staring, she tried to imagine what could have happened. Had she dreamed the whole thing? But if she had, why were there holes in her pant leg?

Swablu chirped again, and she leaned back against the weird tree that had been her pillow last night. The weird tree! She leaped to her feet, Swablu cradled in her skinny arms, and walked around the tree. The moonflowers were closed to shun the daylight, and the butterflies were gone to find flowers and suck the sweet nectar from them. But the weird tree remained, bare and white and twisted, just as she remembered it. Serena peered up at it and frowned.

"You... What did you do?"

There was no answer, of course. Who talks to trees? Not even a ten-year-old would make that mistake, and Serena wasn't *stupid.* She clutched Swablu closer, and the little bluebird attempted to crawl onto her shoulder.

"...What do you want?"

Again, no response. There was just the brook, babbling away as it rushed wherever it was going. The breeze, balmy and gentle, like a whisper from the south.

Listen.

The thought came to her, unbidden but not unwelcome. So she listened. All she heard was Swablu chirping forlornly, and she turned her head to look at it perched on her shoulder.

"Are you hungry?"

Swablu chirped again, sad and frantic, and Serena decided it must be hungry. She was hungry, too. Smiling a little, she walked back around the tree to her backpack only to find it missing. Dread cut her deep in the gut, and she looked around frantically for the Cleffa-print bag. She put it right there! Where did it go?

She almost called out to it, but that was stupid. Backpacks couldn't *talk*, you dummy. It was gone, and that was that. Serena sank to the ground and crossed her arms, feeling a hot wave of sobs coming on. It wasn't *fair*.

Swablu chirped again, still hungry. Didn't it understand that the food was gone? Didn't it understand that it was lost in the forest, alone without a mom to cry to, no one to help, no warm bed to crawl into...

Serena hiccupped, and tears stung her eyes. This was stupid, so stupid. *She* was stupid. Why did she come out here? Why would she leave? Was it so bad listening to her mom? Was it so bad doing what she was told, just so it would make her mom happy? Wasn't that enough?

Swablu chirped again and nudged her cheek with its tiny beak. Its fluffy wings were like a cloud against her neck, impossibly soft, better than any pillow.

"No," she said finally, wiping her nose. "If I didn't come, then you'd be gone."

Swablu cooed softly and peered at her with its big, black eyes. So small, so soft. So alone, save for her.

If I didn't come, then you'd be gone.

Serena bit her lip and tentatively reached for Swablu. It allowed her to pet its little head, soft, even if the blue feathers were coarse compared to its wings.

"*Listen."*

"Okay," Serena whispered. "I can listen."

She got up, determined, and set off along the stream with Swablu. Her little legs carried them a good distance, and soon they were at the edge of the woods again. The stream continued on, but the dense trees reminded her of the Poochyena that had attacked her unawares, and she hesitated.

I'm afraid.

"*It's okay to be afraid,"* her father had told her when there was a bad thunderstorm one night and she was only six. *"Fear makes you strong."*

"*How?"*

Fear made her weak. She shook like a leaf, and she cried. Serena hated crying, but sometimes she couldn't help it. But her father knew the answer. He always knew the right thing to say.

"*Because it shows you what you have to beat to keep going."*

Serena took a deep breath and tried to calm the aggravated trembling in her hands. Swablu huddled into her short hair, also shaking. She reached up and patted its wing.

"Don't worry, Swablu," she said with as much confidence as she could muster. "I'll protect you, I promise."

She closed her eyes and tried to calm down. She was no good if she was shaking and scared. Listen, the dream that told her. So she did her best to listen. The stream, the rustling leaves, the whisper in the wind, Swablu's hungry cooing.

And when she opened her eyes, the world looked different.

Where the forest had been dark before, now there were threads, bright green lights, that flowed through the darkness like a hundred little rivers side by side and on top of each other, all tangled up in a bundle. They wended deeper into the woods like a path, and Serena blinked.

"This way."

Only a child would not question the questionable and laugh in the face of the fantastic. It was a good thing she was a child, then.

The threads of light were everywhere in many colors, even as she followed the thick bundle of them deeper into the forest. The green ones jumped in between the leaves overhead, the brown ones rose from the fleshy mushrooms buried under old, dead leaves, and even wrapped around Swablu, pale blue. She traced the threads from Swablu to herself, surprised to find herself swathed in the glistening strings, soft and pink and bundled over her heart.

Heartstrings, she thought.

They grew from her heart, wrapped around her fingers, and brushed the trees, the leaves, the ground underfoot. Heartstrings, connecting everything. Serena laughed to herself, and Swablu chirped, pleased that she was pleased.

The stream's heartstrings, a clear crystal like the water, led her to another clearing, this one filled with low shrubs that were dotted with fat, orange berries that looked like hearts. Others bore purple fruit, round and plump and juicy, and still others grew slender, red berries as long as her arm and just as skinny. Serena was so taken with them that she almost didn't notice the many Grotle munching on them.

Stout, short Pokémon but more than twice Serena's size, the herd of Grotle moved slowly in between the bushes and the stream, taking turns eating and drinking. The heartstrings swirled around them and took on an earthy, jade hue. The nearest Grotle eyed Serena askance and groaned as it munched on one of the heart-shaped berries—a Pecha berry, if she remembered right from her schooling. The viscous juice ran down its leathery chin and dripped on the grass, thick and succulent. Serena's mouth watered.

Wary of the Grotle but keeping her distance so they wouldn't spook, Serena approached the nearest berry bush and examined the plump, purple berries that hung heavy from the branches. Just the sight of them made her stomach grumble, and she reached for one. But just before she grabbed it, she hesitated.

The heartstrings pulsed a deep, simmering purple, nearly black. They moved with a slushy ebb and flow around the berries, like smoke. Blue eyes gazed longingly at the purple berries. So hungry.

Just colors, she thought, but as soon as it crossed her mind, she made a face.

"*Listen."*

The Grotle munched exclusively on the Pecha berries and filled their bellies in the stream. The red fruits were too high to reach, and the purple berries remained untouched. Serena wasn't *stupid.*

"They're poison," she said to no one in particular.

No one was here.

The nearest Grotle swallowed a chunk of Pecha berry and fixed her with a sleepy stare over its hooked beak.

"They're poison, aren't they?" she asked it.

Purple means poison.

Grotle licked the thick, fruity nectar from its lips and went back to pilfering more Pecha berries from the bush. Serena couldn't explain it, but she smiled anyway, somehow happy even though she couldn't eat those delicious-looking purple berries. Instead, she cautiously approached Grotle and reached for a Pecha berry hanging from the bush it hadn't gotten to yet. This earned her a growl of warning, and she froze.

Incredibly, it was Swablu that came to her rescue. The little bluebird shrieked and fluttered its wings—a fly throwing a high-pitched temper tantrum at a goliath that could have chomped it down for an after-lunch digestif. But Grotle grumbled low in its belly and lost interest in that particular Pecha berry. There were plenty more where it came from.

Serena plucked the fat fruit from its branch and greedily bit into it. The syrupy juice ran down her chin and onto the ground, cloyingly sweet. She gobbled up the fruit in seconds and sucked on her sticky fingers, ready for another. Swablu chirped on her shoulder again, though, and her spirits fell.

Right, you can't eat this stuff.

What did Swablu eat? Her mother had a Fletchling for a pet, and it ate pureed Wurmple and Caterpie and Scatterbug. Swablu was just a baby...

"I need to find some Bugs," she said aloud.

No way she was going to let Swablu go hungry. So she listened again, and the heartstrings throbbed with light. She looked up, following them to the trees where they grew fainter the farther away they got from the Grotle. But patches of chartreuse light glowed among the leaves overhead in the gloom. Something was up there. Determined, Serena approached the tree where she'd seen the glow and looked up. It didn't have as many branches as the one at her house, but she thought she might be able to climb it if she was careful.

"Hang on, Swablu."

Swablu, whether it understood her or not, nuzzled her neck and huddled close either way. Serena gauged the distance between the forest floor and the lowest branch. She would need a running start. Stepping back a few paces, she took off at a sprint and leaped at the trunk. She sprang off the trunk and reached with everything she had for the branch. Her fingers brushed the edges, and she closed them tight around the shaft. Her shoulder jostled painfully, but she held on, feet dangling, and reached with her other arm. Now it was just a matter of upper body strength, and Serena knew all the tricks from her time climbing the trees in her backyard and at school.

She swung her feet to get some momentum, and when she had enough she pulled up and wrapped her legs around the branch so she was hanging like a rotisserie. Giggling to herself, she looked down and

spotted the Grotle that had let her partake of its Pecha berry feast staring up at her. She waved without thinking, and it continued to much on whatever it was eating.

Serena shimmied along the branch and hauled herself up. The cluster of yellowish light was just above, so she crouched and balanced on the balls of her feet and jumped again. The next few branches were close enough together to make the job easy, and soon she was where she needed to be. The little light was a sleeping Scatterbug in a fine, silken cocoon. Many others slept in similar states above and in the adjacent trees, their dull yellow heartstrings swaddling them in their beds. Swablu chirped and shook with hunger, its dark eyes wide as it stared at the Scatterbug.

"Okay, hold on, I'll get it."

Serena reached for the Scatterbug and hesitated. Her mother's Fletchling always ate *pureed* bug. Swablu was so tiny, it wouldn't be able to eat without help. Serena's stomach turned at the thought of what she would have to do, but between Swablu and this Scatterbug, she would choose Swablu any day. Gritting her teeth and telling herself to do it fast so the poor thing wouldn't feel pain, she snatched the Scatterbug and squeezed its black body with all her might.

The Bug didn't even know what hit it as its bulbous head popped and its carapace crunched in between Serena's fingers. A mushy, green goop pooled in her hands, and before Serena had a chance to be disgusted, Swablu chirped and hopped from her shoulder to her forearm and began to slurp up the mush.

"Oh..."

Serena stared as Swablu filled its tiny belly with Bug guts and preened, finally sated. Her hands were sticky with green slime, and she wiped them on the bark of the tree, unwilling to sully her blue jacket any more than it already was.

"So...you're okay now?"

Swablu hopped back up onto her shoulder and cooed. Serena let out a breath of relief, glad that was over for today. She sat back on the branch and looked about the canopy. The Grotle continued to eat down below, and above the sun filtered through the trees like rare whispers, only casting light enough to see in the gloom. Heartstrings filtered down through the sunbeams and fell upon the leaves of the canopy, golden, upon the stunted trees growing from the Grotle's

backs, into the running stream.

"*Listen,"* the voice had urged her.

"It's all the same," she said. "All one thing. All alive, together."

Serena stayed there in the tree for hours, letting time slip by, as she watched the threads that connected all life, hers and the forest's and even the sun and stars above, and she listened.

She was gone for five weeks. Five weeks of listening, really listening to what the world had to say when people weren't so busy talking over it. Five weeks in the quiet, solitude that wasn't solitude—because freedom and solitude are not the same thing, but sometimes, for the precious few who listen, they can be. Five weeks of agony and torture for a mother who had lost her only child for reasons unknown, to faceless culprits, and with no hope of making it right.

Serena didn't think much of it, going home. She woke up one day in her usual spot under the weird tree and watched the butterflies as they woke up and prepared to find the choicest flowers and blooms to feed on that day. And she decided that today, she would go home. Because this wasn't home, as much as it could have been. She had food, water, a place to sleep, protection from the weird tree that seemed to ward off anything that wasn't the butterflies or her. And more importantly, she'd run away not to *run* away, but to make a point. Even ten-year-olds can have a point, she thought proudly. She didn't want to be numb anymore, so she ran, got her blood pumping, and *lived.* And it was enough. For now.

The heartstrings led her wherever she wanted to go. If she wanted to find the Grotle, she could find them. If she wanted to see a secluded hill where rare, blue flowers with red stems grew, she could find it. If she wanted to go home and leave this place, she could find home, too. The beauty of children is not that they don't question—they do, and perhaps more readily than the rest of us—but that they don't ask the needless questions. If you want to go somewhere, go. What possible reason, in this life or the next, could there be not to?

So Serena went home, skipped along the path the heartstrings illuminated for her, and ended up at the edge of Vaniville Town. That was where the police found her. They'd been searching for weeks, sending search parties into the vast woods in droves. They had Pokémon, Mightyena for tracking and fighting and Fletchinder for

aerial support, but there had been no sign of the little girl who'd wandered off one night with nowhere to go. She was lost, they told her mother. Lost without a trace.

Until one day, she wasn't.

Her hair was longer, past her shoulders now and tangled. There was dirt on her face and under her nails. Her baby blue jacket was ripped as though she'd been mauled, though there wasn't a scratch on her. She had a Pokémon with her, a Swablu that would squawk and peck at anyone who tried to get close to it or to Serena. She'd lost her shoes somewhere, or perhaps discarded them. Her pants were rolled up and her feet were filthy and calloused.

She was alive.

In the hospital, they gave her a sponge bath. It was strange, the sensation of warm water after so many days bathing in the cold stream, but not unpleasant. The nurse even set aside a small bowl for Swablu, and the bluebird happily bathed itself until it sparkled like a cloud on a bright, summer day.

The policeman came to ask her questions. He had a gold star on his shirt, shiny, and Swablu wanted to steal it.

"Don't steal it," Serena said.

The sheriff stopped what he was saying and stared at her. "I'm... I'm sorry? I was just asking you if you remember anybody with you in the woods. Maybe a man? Or a woman?"

Serena fixed him with an empty stare. No, she wasn't with anybody, just Swablu and the weird tree and the stream and the Grotle and the Pecha berries and all the rest. But he didn't hear her, didn't see the truth in her eyes. He didn't listen.

None of them did.

Grace, her mom, swept her into a fierce hug when she turned up at the hospital. She was crying and shaking, kind of like how Serena had been that first night. And because of that, Serena hugged her back. Being alone was hard, she'd learned, and some people didn't like it as much as she did.

Grace let her keep Swablu and didn't even try to contest it. For that, Serena was happy to hold her hand as they walked home. That night

was odd, she remembered. Grace always had her glass of wine and the TV on this late at night, but tonight she brought Serena to her room, dressed her in a set of pajamas that looked new—blue, her favorite color—and curled up with her in bed. Grace said nothing about Swablu curled up next to them on the pillow, and Fletchling held its usual post on the swing next to the bed.

Serena was tired, she realized. It had been a long day, and she wasn't used to the softness of the bed. But for her mom's sake, for letting Swablu stay without a word and for not asking any more questions whose answers she wouldn't listen to anyway, Serena let herself drift off to sleep. She dreamed of the forest.

It didn't last. Swablu could stay, that was a subject Grace didn't even attempt to broach. Serena didn't ask why, not wanting to put it on the table for discussion. There was just...something when Grace looked at the bird in quiet, almost sad contemplation, something Serena's ten-year-old mind could not yet recognize, not until she was older. But Swablu stayed, and that was enough.

The problem was the silence. Serena never minded the quiet. She'd always loved it, and for weeks it had been all that occupied her mind. Her mother, not so much. She would stare at Serena, unsure what to say, then look away when Serena caught her eye.

"I'll listen," Serena said on the third day as Grace poured her a bowl of Cheerios. "If you wanna tell me."

Grace stopped mid pour and stared blankly at Serena. There was nothing there in that look, no empathy, no sadness, no happiness or anger or anything at all. For a split second, she was a statue, a shadow of a person jostled by the voice of a child that had lived more in five weeks than she had in her entire life.

"What?" Grace said finally.

"I'm good at listening."

Swablu waddled on the counter and pecked at the Cheerios, gobbling them up. Grace didn't bother to swat it away, so taken aback by her young daughter's offer.

"All right." Grace set down the box and forgot the milk as she crossed her arms. "Why did you come back? How?"

Serena looked up at her mother and noted how...wrinkled she looked.

Her forehead was all scrunched up, there were folds around her eyes and mouth that hadn't been there before, and the blue eyes that matched her own were awash with fear, like she wouldn't like what she was about to hear but she was still asking. Serena had no reason to lie, so she didn't.

"I followed the Fairy lights home."

Silence stretched between them, and Grace appeared to have no intention of breaking it. Serena reached for the jug of milk on the counter and poured some into her cereal, which earned her an irritated squawk from Swablu, who'd been deprived of its free meal. Grace just stared.

"Fairies," she said, hoarse. "Right..."

In retrospect, Serena took that moment to be the turning point. 'Fairy' wasn't a word taken lightly, not a thousand years ago and not even now. In a way, maybe she was lucky that Grace, despite being an ordinary pleb with no strange powers or influence over Pokémon of any element, was an educated woman with enough sense to know to shut up when she heard her ten-year-old daughter talk about Fairies. The police never heard a word of it, the neighbors even less.

"Here." Grace pressed a Pokéball into Serena's small hands on her eleventh birthday, just weeks after her rediscovery. "Happy birthday, sweetie."

The Rhyhorn was small for its species, young and restless, but Grace's own Rhyhorn was quick to intimidate it into submission. Even plebs, those not gifted (or cursed, depending on your perspective) with Tamer abilities, could handle a Pokémon or two if they were careful.

"I don't wanna race."

The words came without thinking. Serena hadn't ever really thought about them, but as soon as she said them, she knew they were true. She didn't want to wear the shirts her mom picked out in the morning. She wanted a hat, a sky blue one with a yellow flower pin. She wanted to play outside, climb trees with Swablu, eat wild Pecha berries. She didn't want to follow in her mom's footsteps and race Rhyhorn.

"We'll talk about that when you're older," Grace said, tight-lipped.

Serena stared up at her mom with that hollow look she'd come out of

the forest wearing. "I don't wanna race," she repeated.

Grace's calm façade she'd cultivated over the past weeks, to her credit, dissolved as the last straw broke. "You *will* race because I said so! I've had enough of your little rebellion. Ever since you came back from your little escapade, you've been the queen of this castle. Well, no more. You're in *my* house, and if I say you're going to race one day, you will!"

"This is Dad's house."

Grace turned beet red and shook with rage. She sputtered, but she couldn't find the words to rebut an eleven-year-old and still retain her dignity as a human being. So instead, she stormed off, grabbing the half-empty bottle of wine from the counter on her way but no glass. Serena watched her go. The Pokéball her mother had given her sat on the counter, shiny and new. She grabbed it and, with Swablu at her shoulder, went outside to the front yard. There, she tossed out the Pokéball and released the Rhyhorn Grace had gone through so much trouble to procure for her.

It was an immense thing, Rhyhorn. A squat but thick block of shale with eyes and a mouth. It almost didn't look real, more boulder than beast, but it was real enough to locate Serena and grunt in warning. Red eyes, shifty and afraid, peered at her. Afraid? Serena smiled. She was so small and puny compared to this creature.

"Hello," she said gently, reaching out a hand to it.

Rhyhorn's pupils narrowed and it backpedaled, wary, and Swablu chirped at it. The species was known for their small brains, unlike their more intelligent evolved forms, as Serena would learn in the years to come. It wasn't Rhyhorn's fault, really. One moment, it was sunning with its herd in the mountains north of Driftveil and the next it was in Serena's front yard a whole world away, alone and with no idea what had happened to it.

Serena bit her lip. "It's okay, you're not alone. I know you miss your herd, but...I'm here."

Rhyhorn blinked, its simple mind trying to process her words, and in its distraction, Serena reached out a hand and touched her fingers to its prominent nose horn. Instantly, the heartstrings that had led her home bloomed around Rhyhorn like a nest of light. Ruddy and gray-brown, they ran over its uneven skin and the grooves in its plated armor like falling rain.

"I'm here," she said again. "You're not alone."

Rhyhorn relaxed, growling low in the pit of its belly, and Serena gained enough courage to approach and scratch the leathery flesh at the base of its head. Rhyhorn slumped at the pleasant sensation and let its eyes drift closed to better enjoy the sensation. Serena giggled, while Swablu chirped and hopped onto Rhyhorn's head to explore.

All the while, Grace looked on from the second story bedroom window, face ashen and troubled. After weeks of research and subtle inquiry, she knew what her next move was. If she loved her daughter, and she did, she had to make the call. There was a time in every parent's life when they were no longer enough for their children. That point came at different times for different people, for different reasons, but Grace knew her time was up no matter how much she wanted to deny it. If she didn't act now, she could lose her daughter forever, and she was not going through that again. Not after what had happened with the girl's father. She knew when she was in over her head, and she was not about to let Serena suffer because of her fears.

So she picked up the phone and dialed the number she'd found weeks ago in her research, hoping for an answer to her prayers.

Her hair was long, far past her shoulders. Her mom had neglected to cut it for whatever reason, but Serena didn't mind. Swablu was always nuzzling it and tickling her, something it hadn't done when her hair was short. Serena tugged on a tress of honey hair and twirled it around her finger as she waited in the clean, white lobby of this very large, very empty building with her mom. It was a laboratory of some sort, her mom had explained, and the professor here could help Serena.

"Why do I need help?" Serena asked point blank.

Grace got that look like she was unsure. It was a look Serena often found directed at her. "He'll help you. You're different, remember? He'll help."

She said it like a mantra, and Serena just went with it. If her mom wanted to do something, she would do it. This was no different. Eleven-year-olds didn't have a whole lot of say, anyway. But she had an inkling of what her mom was getting at. The kids at school stayed away from Serena. They always had, to be fair, but now they stared while they stayed away. Something had irked them about her,

something invisible that they couldn't explain, and she couldn't pinpoint what. It wasn't like that before.

Serena didn't mind, per se. Being alone meant having peace and quiet. There were plenty of trees to climb in the playground during recess. But sometimes the other kids would be in the sandbox building castles, and she wondered what they would think of a castle she built. Sometimes they would play Lava Monster, where the gravel was the lava and you had to be nimble and jump around the playground and surrounding trees to avoid it, or the Lava Monster would get you. She would've been good at that game, climbing trees and navigating the jungle gym. But they never asked her, and when she approached, they always moved the game somewhere else.

Grace tugged on her hand and pulled her from her thoughts. It was time for them to head upstairs to the lab, the professor was ready for them. The receptionist directed them to the elevator and buzzed them up. Serena held her mom's hand even though Swablu was perched on her shoulder for reassurance. Grace didn't have a Swablu to reassure her.

The elevator dinged on the third floor and opened up into a pristine, white laboratory filled with people in lab coats and blue jeans and flip flops bustling about, checking odd machines whose names Serena probably couldn't pronounce, and a few Pokémon. Machoke moved heavy objects, while Vivillon in various colors floated about, perched on some of the lab assistants' heads, or just minded their own business. A small, orange lizard with a flaming tail zeroed in on Serena and scampered toward her, double eyelids blinking up at her. Grace recoiled and pulled Serena back, but before she could do something to reassure her mom, a young man in a dark shirt and a white lab coat rushed toward them.

"Charmander!" he yelled.

The orange lizard shied and looked back at him over its shoulder.

"Hey, don't go scaring people, okay?"

He kneeled down and held out a hand for the Pokémon.

"He didn't scare me," Serena said.

The young man looked up, and when they locked eyes, Serena felt a surge of something, like someone had punched her in the gut. His heartstrings... They were all over the place. And red like blood. They

flew out the back of him like wings almost. She was so taken aback that she couldn't speak. She'd never seen *red* ones before, not on a person, at least. Everyone in Vaniville town, even her mom, had the faintest white heartstrings, almost translucent and barely there.

The boy stood up, sparkling blue eyes trained on her, and made an effort to nod at Grace. "Sorry about that, ma'am. Charmander's just playful."

"It's fine," Grace said, tugging Serena closer. "I'm here to see Professor Sycamore?"

The boy blinked. "Oh, sure. I'll take you to him." His gaze shifted back to Serena, and he grinned. It was the prettiest grin she'd ever seen, and it made her stomach do a little flip. "I'm Alain. What's your name?"

"This is Serena, my daughter, and I'm Grace," Grace said curtly. "Professor Sycamore?"

"...Right, this way, Serena."

If Grace noticed his slip, she said nothing. Serena smiled and blushed. There was something about him...

"That's a good looking Swablu you've got, Serena," Alain said. "You know, when Swablu evolve, they become Dragons."

Serena looked up at him and his pretty grin that made her get all twisty inside. The red heartstrings circled him in a lazy arc, like wings floating on the clouds. "Really?"

"Yeah. And Charmander here, he's a descendant of Dragons, so he used to be one, just not anymore."

Charmander croaked from its place in Alain's arms.

"*Used* to be?"

How could something 'used to be' something else? Did *she* used to be something, too?

"Look, I don't want to be rude," Grace said in hushed tones, "but I'd rather you not speak to my daughter. We're here to see Professor Sycamore, that's it."

Alain sobered and nodded. "Sure, my apologies, ma'am. I didn't mean

to offend you."

"Just take us to the professor, please."

Sycamore was a young man back then, his hair loose and his morals looser, a true child of the modern age. But in his sharp, grey eyes, there lay a frothing intelligence just below the surface that even Grace could not argue with, despite appearances.

"Ah, Mrs. Gabena! Welcome," Sycamore said, extending a hand with the same gusto and pomp he employed in all his interactions with people. "I've been looking forward to meeting you."

"It's Miss," Grace corrected him.

Sycamore didn't miss a beat and just smiled brighter. "Of course. May I call you Grace?"

"If you like."

"Well then, Grace, is this your lovely daughter whom we spoke about? Is this Serena?"

He bent down on one knee so he could look up at Serena, and she blinked at him. He didn't have the same feeling as Alain, and she looked to her left to catch Alain's eye as if to accuse him of this. He held her gaze, curious.

"Ah, I see you've met Alain," Sycamore said amiably. "He's what you'd call a Titan. Have you ever heard of that, Serena?"

She shook her head shyly.

"It's a type of Tamer, a person with a close affinity to a type of Pokémon." Sycamore smiled back at Alain. "Dragons like Titans best of all."

Grace tightened her grip on Serena's hand. "Professor, I'm not here to play house with your lab assistants. Excuse me, but I'm not. You have my correspondence. What do you recommend?"

Sycamore's expression hardened and he stood up. "Right. I've gone over everything we discussed, and coupled with my own research, I think it's best that Serena stay here for a while. I'd like to observe her, run some tests. Nothing invasive, I assure you." He put up his hands, both of which were covered in prayer beads and ratty, hand-woven

bracelets halfway up his forearms where his lab coat had been hastily rolled up. "But I'd like to be sure, so you can be sure," he added quickly.

Grace was silent for a moment as she thought about that, while Serena kept her eyes on Alain and the red threads that danced around him.

Pretty.

Grace kneeled down and cupped Serena's face in her hands, tearing her eyes away from Alain. "Serena, sweetie? You're gonna stay here for a little while, okay? But I'll be back soon, I promise."

"Okay," Serena said softly.

Grace nodded and blinked back the tears from her eyes. "You can keep Rhyhorn with you, okay? You can practice riding him, so when I come pick you up, we can try riding around the yard together, okay?"

"No."

Grace blinked rapidly, her eyes flashing with something, but it was gone just as quick. She nodded again. "Okay, you practice, and I'll see you soon, sweetie."

Serena watched her stand and exchange a few hushed words with Sycamore. Frowning, she turned to see Alain watching her over her shoulder, his grin gone and expression unreadable. They held each other's gazes, neither willing to look away, until Sycamore clapped his hands together.

"Well! I think this calls for a proper celebration. Serena, I don't suppose you like cake, do you?"

Serena swallowed and looked up at Sycamore. He had a kind smile, she thought. "Yes."

"Excellent! It just so happens that I had a cake delivered this afternoon with your name on it. Come now, let's get you settled into your room and then you can have the first slice. How 'bout it?"

Serena cast another glance at Alain, whose hands were in his pockets, then back at Sycamore. Tentatively, she accepted his offered hand and let him lead her to the back of the lab, where another elevator was embedded in the wall that led to the living quarters. She looked back and caught a glimpse of Grace as the elevator doors closed, clutching

her purse in a white-knuckled grip and shaking a little, her hair more frazzled than it would normally be for a trip to the fashionable Lumiose City.

"...and I know it doesn't seem like a fun place in here, but my neighbor happens to have a son about your age," Sycamore prattled on as he held Serena's hand and punched a button in the elevator wall. "You might get along with him, if you want?"

Serena watched the doors close and let her eyes fall to her feet. Swablu cooed and nuzzled her ear, while Rhyhorn's Pokéball sat in the pocket of her blue dress, a little heavy.

"Okay," she said numbly, not really hearing him.

The elevator dinged and they exited together into the living quarters, where Sycamore led her to the third room on the right. It was a spacious bedroom with a queen-sized bed, a blue comforter that matched the curtains, and a spectacular view of the lights of Lumiose City in the distance. Swablu chirped and hopped down from Serena's shoulder to waddle about the carpeted room and explore.

Sycamore kneeled down again and rested his hands on Serena's shoulders. "Hey, I know it must be hard to be apart from your mom."

Serena shook her head. "It's harder for her."

He blinked, somewhat taken aback at the hardness in her certainty and perhaps the echo of truth in it. Eleven-year-olds are not supposed to sound so sure of anything but candy and mischief. But to his credit, and perhaps to Serena's sanity, he took her seriously.

"I think you're right. You went away once before, right? Into the woods?"

Serena nodded.

"And you said the Fairies led you back home."

She frowned. "No, I didn't say that."

"You didn't?"

She shook her head.

"Then what was it?"

"It was the Fairy *lights*."

She lifted her hand and ran her fingers along a bundle of heartstrings that extended from her heart and wrapped around Sycamore, very faint and white just like they were around Grace and her classmates and almost everyone she passed, toward the sunlight pouring through the window behind him. He followed her small fingers with rapt attention.

"Fairy lights," he said. "And you can see them? Like a path? Can you see them now?"

He had a kind smile, the kind you could trust. Maybe...it was okay.

"Yes," she said.

Sycamore leaned closer, like they were sharing a secret. "And...can you tell me who, or what, taught you how to see them?"

Swablu had found the tag on the comforter and was making a game out of pulling on it, delighted at the crinkling sound it made.

"The weird tree," Serena said, keeping her eye on Swablu. "It was grateful for when I helped Swablu."

"The weird tree," Sycamore repeated. "Serena, can you describe this tree? Did... Did it speak to you? What did it look like?"

She thought about that. "It looked like a rainbow. And it kissed me, here." She pointed to her forehead.

Sycamore sat back, dumbstruck. "Did it, now?"

He looked funny like that, with his mouth open and his long, dark dreads limp around his chin and all those bracelets. So funny, in fact, she decided to share a secret with him.

"It told me something."

"Yes?"

Serena cupped her small hands around his cheeks, biting her lip not to giggle at the stubble that tickled her fingers. She leaned in close to his ear and whispered, "Listen."

She pulled back and smiled, maybe for the first time since she'd returned from the forest, and released him to play with Swablu.

Sycamore watched her, a little star struck and at a loss for words.

"I'll get that cake," he said after a while, just watching her.

"Can Alain come? If... If he's hungry?"

Sycamore studied her for a moment. "Of course. I'm sure he'd be delighted."

Magus.

That was the word Sycamore whispered when he stole a glance at Serena. No longer a pleb, like her parents or her grandparents before them. Now, she was a Magus, one of three original Tamer classes created, not born and bred like the rest. It wouldn't be until years later that she understood the true ramifications of her transformation. The Fairy Tamers, the Magi of old, had died out centuries ago, or so the stories said. Suicide, every one of them, after they slaughtered as many of their loved ones as they could get their hands on in a paroxysm of unexplained cruelty. Nobody ever knew why. They'd just gone mad, maybe the power went to their heads, a bad trip. Maybe they just couldn't live with it anymore. There are some secrets of nature that were never meant for humans to comprehend.

Sycamore didn't tell Serena any of this.

Days of study slowly turned to weeks, months. He would ask her to show him the heartstrings, follow them, usually to find something or someone. Sometimes he asked her to find Alain, but that was cheating. He was easy to find, so red and loud and bright compared to the others.

"You always find me so fast," Alain said when she inevitably tracked him down to the second floor's cafeteria at lunch hour this time, his Charmander nibbling on his food while he was distracted.

Serena smiled shyly. "'Cause your wings stick out. There." She pointed at the red wings that grew from his back, invisible to all but her.

Alain followed her finger, but he couldn't see what she saw. "Wings, huh?" He ruffled her hair, a habit he'd gotten into whenever she said something odd but endearing. "Do you have wings, too?"

Serena shook her head. "Just you."

"But those heartstrings." He lowered his voice. Aside from Sycamore's personal lab assistant, Dexio, Alain was the only other person privy to the reason Serena was here at all. "Everybody's got them?"

She shook her head again. "Yes, but no. Ours are bright and pretty. You're red, and I'm pink. And Swablu's mostly blue, it's my favorite color. Charmander's orange, like his tail." She traced the looping heartstrings around Charmander's fiery tail as it chewed its food and watched her curiously. "Everybody else is hard to see. They're not bright."

Alain's eyes watched her with understanding, wondering a little at this sight she possessed, this odd synesthesia that let her see what he could only dream. It would take time to ease Serena into the nuances of natural classism, as the politicians liked to call it. Tamers and plebs, the ones with the gift, the ones without. Gift was a loaded word—to many, the Tamers were nothing but abominations, aberrant outliers allowed to coexist with the masses (most of the time). To some, they were the imperious overlords, unofficial kings and queens born to positions of prominence and power simply because of blood. It was easy to believe more often than not, when some could hold their breaths for an hour in a riptide, others could heal by absorbing an open flame, and still others could read minds, see the future in nebulous premonitions, or simply look into your very soul and rip it out with a glancing caress. But in every version, one truth stayed the same:

"We're different, you and me," Alain whispered. "And that's okay. Whatever happens, remember that you're not alone. I'm like you, and there's others like us, too. Maybe they have different colors?"

Serena frowned, and he blessed her with that grin that made her stomach do somersaults.

"It's okay to be different," he promised her.

It was a promise she would not soon forget.

One day, Sycamore asked her about a heart. No, not a 'heart'.

"Hart," he repeated. "A blue hart. It's like a deer, but bigger. And these." He picked up a pair of Sawsbuck antlers that someone had turned into a sculpture and lifted it over his head. "Antlers. They're the rainbow you saw, right?"

Serena frowned. "I don't remember a deer..."

Sycamore set down the antlers. "It's okay, Serena. I know it's hard to remember something from so long ago. But, if you can..." He drifted off and had an idea. He turned his computer screen toward her after typing something in. "Does this look familiar?"

There was a sketch done in pencil of a deer-like creature with antlers nearly half as big as it was. They curled and reached for the sky, and Serena smiled.

"The weird tree. It had branches like that."

Sycamore nodded. "Yes, that's what I've called Xerneas's Tree Form. Ah, that is, the tree's name is Xerneas. It's not really a tree, but a Pokémon, just like your Swablu. It only looks like a tree sometimes, but really it's a Fairy-type Pokémon. You see, Serena, I think you're a very special person because you met Xerneas. And Xerneas liked you so much that it turned you into a Magus, a person with very special abilities that hasn't been seen in hundreds of years. What do you think about that?"

Serena looked at him blankly. "...Xerneas?"

Sycamore shook his head. "This is all going in one ear and out the other for you, isn't it? Well, that's all right. You've done enough for one day."

"Is Alain here?"

Sycamore laughed. "You really get along with Alain, huh? Yes, he's here somewhere. Apparently, there was an incident with a very upset Gible, and he went to deal with it."

Serena didn't really know what that meant, but if Alain was here, then that was all that mattered.

"I believe he went to the terrace. You know the way, right?"

Serena nodded and headed for the elevator. Sycamore's lab took up four floors of a seven-story building on the outskirts of Lumiose City, just beyond where the suburbs gave way to the busy streets of downtown. The top floors were residential. Serena's room was on the sixth floor, in the same hallway as Alain's. He lived here, just as she did. Maybe his mom had dropped him off here one day and never came back, too. She'd never asked, and he'd never brought it up or

asked about her mom. He was nice like that. Quiet, a little sad looking sometimes when he thought nobody was looking, but he never asked the questions Serena didn't want to answer. Maybe he just knew.

Serena hummed to herself as the punched the elevator button for the seventh floor. She'd never had a sibling. Was this what it was like to have a big brother? She'd seen some of the kids at school back in Vaniville walking home with their older siblings, but nobody ever walked her home. Would Alain have walked her home if she'd asked?

Swablu cooed and nuzzled her hair, and she smiled.

"He'd walk us both home," she assured the little bluebird.

The elevator opened up on to a covered foyer that led to the rooftop terrace. It was reserved for lab employees, so there were only a couple people here in the late afternoon having a smoke or catching up on company gossip. No one paid Serena any mind as she gave them a wide berth and got lost among the potted flowers and finely manicured trees. There was even a pond in the middle of the terrace filled with Magikarp you could feed.

She looked near the pond, but there was no sign of Alain anywhere. No trace of the red ribbons that flowed around him and peaked in those majestic wings, always in flight like each step he took could lift him into the sky and take him far from here. She could always follow them and find him, but he wasn't here now. Her shoulders slumped. Maybe Sycamore had forgotten where he went? He wouldn't make it up...

Serena sat down at the base of one of the trees overlooking the pond and hugged her knees to her chest. Swablu hopped off her shoulder and waddled to the water's edge to have a drink. The fat Magikarp watched it with wide, vacant eyes, *glug glug glugging* as they floated listlessly in the shallow water.

"Your hair's pretty."

Serena jumped and whipped her head around at the voice that had spoken too close for comfort. A boy about her age with dark hair and eyes and a round, upturned nose was kneeling just to her left near the lilac bushes. He had something in his lap, some kind of oversized, gilded dagger with a blue ribbon tied at the hilt. He stared openly at her, eyes wide with curiosity and a small smile tugging at his lips.

"Um..."

He stood up abruptly and took up the dagger in his hand, grinning brightly. The weapon was as long as his arm, but he didn't struggle to point it at her. "Can I cut it?"

Serena gasped as he brandished the sheathed sword at her, and a spike of fear struck her like lightning for the first time since her first night in the forest when she'd run away. She scrambled back and jostled Rhyhorn's Pokéball from her pocket, and it popped open with a flash of light. The squat rhinoceros towered over her at the shoulder while she was sprawled on the ground and growled. Swablu chirped frantically and half jumped, half fluttered onto Rhyhorn's head.

The boy stopped short at Rhyhorn's threatening growl and dropped his sword. But then, the strangest thing happened: the sword floated where he'd dropped it and didn't hit the ground. Serena's jaw dropped as the jewel on the sword's sheath opened up to reveal a spooky, blue eye that swiveled about to see better.

"Whoa! Whoa there, you don't wanna Stomp me, okay?" the boy said, putting up his hands.

The sentient sword floated to his eye level and began to emit an eerie, violet smoke. Rhyhorn growled in warning, but it advanced no further, uneasy as it kept a wary eye on the floating sword. Serena finally regained her bearings and got to her feet, a hand on Rhyhorn's rough shoulder.

"Who're you? Why'd you wanna cut me?" she demanded.

The boy shook his hands out at her. "Huh? No, not *you*, dummy. Your hair! It's pretty, I told you."

Serena made a sour face. "Then why'd you wanna cut it? If it's so pretty."

He looked at her funny. "What else d'you do with hair?"

To her embarrassment, Serena had no answer for him. He smiled again, and her blood boiled. He thought she was stupid, she was sure of it. Serena wasn't *stupid*.

"I'm Calem." He stuck out his hand, but before she had a chance to rebuff his politeness, he focused his attention on Rhyhorn. "Wow! Your Rhyhorn's so cool! Hey, can I pet him?"

He didn't wait for permission and reached out a hand to Rhyhorn.

"No, don't!" Serena tried to warn him.

Rhyhorn was still green and unused to people aside from her mom and her. That was why she kept it in its Pokéball and only let it out in her room to play. But Rhyhorn grumbled pleasantly when the boy ran his fingers over its nose horn, like it had known Calem all its life. Serena just stared.

"How...?"

"Oh, I'm Calem, by the way. Did I already say that? Who're you?"

Serena eyed the floating sword *thing* that hovered just behind Calem, its tattered, blue ribbon fluttering in the nonexistent wind. "Serena," she said.

"Serena, huh? Hey, my mom told me about you. You're Professor Sycamore's new friend, right? Oh, that's right! You're Grace Gabena's kid! The famous Rhyhorn racer! That's why you gotta Rhyhorn, right? Wow, so cool!"

There was more than one question in there, and as soon as he mentioned racing, Serena was prepared to not answer a single one. Instead, she pointed at the sword floating behind him and tried to ignore the sensation of her skin crawling as its eye blinked down at her.

"What's that?"

Calem followed her pointing finger and smiled. "Oh, that's Honedge. She's my Pokémon." He paused. "You *do* know Honedge, right?"

She remained silent, unwilling to admit that no, she'd never heard of such a Pokémon, but her silence gave her away.

"Oh, that's okay! Lotsa people don't know about it. Honedge's the best Pokémon ever." He looked around as if to make sure no one was eavesdropping and, satisfied, he gestured for her to come closer. "See, Honedge's a Ghost."

A Ghost?

Serena looked back up at the floating sword. The faint, purple smoke it emanated seemed to come from nowhere and disappeared into thin air. And she'd never seen a sword float on its own like that before...

"But she's also a Steel-type. That's why she likes me. My dad said Honedge were all real swords once, and great warriors used to fight with them and kill their enemies in battle, like this!" He struck his best swashbuckling stance and slashed the air with an invisible blade in hand. "But when the warriors all died, the swords still wanted to fight. So they got up and started fighting on their own."

Most kids her age didn't talk much to Serena when she was in school back in Vaniville, which was fine with her. But this kid wouldn't shut up, and she found herself a little bit at a loss for what to say to him. She was supposed to say something, right? What do you say to a kid whose best friend is a floating sword?

And then she remembered his name. "Calem... Professor Sycamore said you lived next door. Why're you here?"

Calem put his hands on his hips over his khaki shorts. "Yup, I'm his neighbor, all right. My mom works at the lab downstairs. My dad's away a lot for work, so I get to play up here every day after school till my mom's ready to go home."

"You're here by yourself every day?"

Maybe she'd said it wrong, because his smile faded a little. "Um, yeah. But Honedge keeps me company. We like to play tag and we swordfight, too. I guess you could join if you wanna. You know, since you're here and all. Um, do you wanna?"

Serena opened her mouth to reply, but he suddenly beamed with a new idea.

"Oh, I know! You could ride on Rhyhorn and try to catch us! How 'bout it? I bet you're a crazy good racer like your mom. My dad 'n me watch her races on TV when he's home."

The more he talked, the more she began to tremble with building rage. "I don't wanna race with you!" she shouted.

With that, Serena stalked off toward the pond and sat down with her knees to her chest and stared at the water. Rhyhorn grumbled and lumbered toward her, sensing her distress, and Swablu chirped.

Stupid Calem and his stupid game. I don't wanna play, I don't.

Movement behind her, then a shadow on her back. "Serena? Did I say something bad?"

She didn't reply and continued to glare at the water.

"Hey...if you don't wanna play, that's okay. I can just play by myself, like I always do."

They sat in silence for a moment, and still Serena said nothing. Eventually he got up.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "Don't be mad."

He backed off, and Serena turned to see him with Honedge. The sword floated before him, silent, and he drew a wooden stick he'd found somewhere. They faced off, and Calem slashed and spun enough to make himself dizzy, while Honedge dutifully parried and kept its swiveling eye on him.

Serena watched them from her vantage point by the pond next to Rhyhorn, who'd sat down and begun to drink, much to the Magikarp's dismay. Serena leaned against Rhyhorn's rough skin and watched Calem, her anger slowly ebbing.

He didn't know, she told herself. *It's not his fault.*

Nobody knew. How could she get mad at him for something everybody else did, too? But they were all so much bigger than her, and he was just a kid, like her. A kid with a flying sword. Honedge tapped him on the shoulder when he overshot a swing, and he grunted.

"Ow, you got me," he said with a laugh. "Gotta be faster, huh?"

He felt her eyes on him and turned to wave. Serena frowned and sat back down, but it was too late, he was already walking toward her.

"That's why you ran away, right?" he said.

Serena swallowed hard as he sat down next to her, his dark eyes on her profile and Honedge floating behind him. What was it with this kid? He couldn't be on his own for five minutes without bothering her?

"What?" she said.

"You don't wanna race. I heard my mom talking to Professor Sycamore about how you ran away to the woods. It's 'cause of your mom, right? 'Cause you didn't wanna race like her."

Slack-jawed, Serena turned to look at him and didn't have any words.

"It's cool. Sometimes I don't wanna do what my parents say, either. But mine listen mosta the time. Unless it's about broccoli, then I have to eat it when they say so, haha."

"How did you..."

Honedge's shifty eye blinked down at her. Just looking at it gave her a chill, but she couldn't place why. She'd never seen a Ghost before, but it didn't look like any Ghost she might have dreamed up in a nightmare. Just a rusty old sword...

"So why're you here, anyway?" Calem went on. "I mean, you came back to your mom, and now you're here and she's not. What's up with that?"

What a weirdo, she couldn't help but think. But no one else had asked her why she was here. Sycamore, Alain, her mother, everyone just adjusted to her presence here without question. Sycamore was interested in her, that much was certain, but she didn't know why, exactly. Except... Except that...

"...I'm different," she whispered.

Calem regarded her silently with a kind of wistful understanding only a child can grasp, unquestioning and trusting, nostalgically so. He blinked and fished around his blue jacket pocket for something. Serena peered, curious, and he produced a small pocketknife. With a click, he flipped open the knife and a small but sharp blade poked out from the handle.

"I'm different, too," he said, adopting that same conspiratorial whisper he'd used earlier when he told her about Honedge. "Wanna see?"

He pressed the knife into her hand to take, but she pushed back.

"Go on, take it. Cut me here." He spread his palm for her to see.

Serena shook her head, alarmed. "I'm not gonna cut you."

Sighing, Calem took back the knife and pressed the blade against his bare palm hard enough to draw blood. He dragged blade across the length of his hand to Serena's horror, and she recoiled.

"Stop!"

"No, look." He held out his palm to her. "See? No blood."

His palm was intact, a little red from the pressure of the blade, but uncut. Serena stared, not believing what she saw, and without thinking she traced her finger over his hand.

"You're not bleeding."

"Wanna try now?"

He held out the knife for her again, and this time she accepted it. Biting her cheek, she gently poked his offered palm with the point, but it didn't break the skin. Emboldened, she pressed harder and dragged the blade, but no matter how hard she pushed, the skin didn't break. Blue eyes wide with awe, she looked up at him again.

"How'd you do that?"

"Some Adamantines don't cut easy if we think about it real hard, like me," he explained as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

Adamantine?

"You *do* know what Adamantine is, doncha?"

Serena said nothing, but he took a deep breath and explained.

"It's why Honedge likes me so much. I'm like..." He struggled to find the right word. "I'm like her, Steel. Your Rhyhorn's kinda the same, too. All rocky and stuff. My dad likes the rocky Pokémon. But if you cut him, he'd bleed. But not me! Uh, I'm not s'posed to talk about it, so don't tell anybody, okay? Promise?"

She didn't quite follow, but she got the gist: he was different. Like her. She nodded, and he relaxed a little.

"So, what're you?"

Swablu chirped and hopped onto Serena's lap, its fluffy, marshmallow wings like a winter coat around its small body.

"*I think you're a very special person because you met Xerneas."*

She didn't know what it all meant, why he'd gotten so excited when she told him about the weird tree, but Sycamore had a kind smile.

"Magus," Serena whispered.

"Huh?" Calem looked at her funny. "What's that?"

"*Listen."*

She ran her fingers through Swablu's fluffy feathers and looked up at Calem, really looked at him. Heartstrings, shimmering silver like her mother's wedding wing, looped around him like platinum ribbons, ebbing and flowing. A bundle of the glistening threads bumped the pale pink threads that wrapped around her, and she felt a small jolt, like static electricity.

"Serena?" Calem said.

"*It's okay to be different."*

She smiled shyly. "You're pretty, too."

His heartstrings glowed softly in her eyes, rivers of silver that flowed around Honedge, too, and bound them in the same tide.

Calem got to his feet and dusted himself off. "You're weird, but I like you." He held out a hand for her. "Wanna play now? I could teach you how to sword fight if you want? Well, I mean, I'm still learning from Honedge, but I've been learning for a long time so I'm probably way better than you. Um...I can teach you if you want?" he repeated.

She eyed his hand, still unsure, but her eyes were drawn to the undulating, silver ribbons that encircled his hand, so much like Alain, but entirely different. She'd never had a big brother, but she'd never had a friend, either.

She took his hand, and he pulled her up with a smile.

"Uh, okay, stand over here. You can use my stick. Just, uh, swing it if you see me coming, okay?"

Serena let him guide her into position, while Swablu and Rhyhorn watched from the pond's shore. Some of the lab workers on their break noticed them as they began swinging sticks at each other, the sentient sword hovering protectively just behind them, and stopped to watch. But none of them approached.

Serena managed to whack Calem on the shoulder, startling him, and the look on his face was so ridiculous that she giggled.

"Oh, you think that's funny, huh? Then take this!"

Calem jabbed, and Serena did her best to dodge him. Swablu chirped in excitement, and Calem laughed as he stumbled, out of breath.

By the time Alain wandered onto the terrace in search of Serena hours later, her cheeks hurt from laughing so much. He watched them play, something inside him unwilling to end their fun, and watched them from a distance, smiling.

Twelve years later

Lips slick and sticky with blood and saliva, Alain ignored the rattling sound his breathing made as he struggled to stay on his feet. The smoke alone was enough to asphyxiate the room and everyone in it, but that Headbutt to Mega Charizard's gut hit harder than he predicted it would. Every crunch of bone, every burn, every shudder of fear that passed through the black Dragon crouched in front of him, Alain felt as acutely as if their positions were switched. The gash on his palm still bled, but his crimson handprint between Mega Charizard's wraith-like wings had dried and burned to nothing but a skid mark after that last Blast Burn.

They wouldn't be able to keep this up much longer. If he passed out now, Mega Charizard was done for. If that devil hound landed another direct hit, though, Alain would be done for either way. Mega Evolution, for all its power and glory, came at a steep price Alain was not ready to pay in full today.

"Inferno."

That woman, sleek as a serpent and with a taste for venom, thrived in the building heat that shimmered the air, while Alain only grew weaker. Her Mega Houndoom snarled, and the calcified horns that grew out of its head like a crown of melded swords began to leak fire tongues in response to its trainer's command.

More heat, Alain thought. And this woman, an Ignifera, a Fire Tamer born and bred, would only relish in it while he burned. Unless he stopped her right now, right here. Bracing himself for the flesh-eating heat, Alain backpedaled away from Mega Houndoom and Mega Charizard as far back as he could go without jumping the railing.

"Hurry! Dragon Claw!" he shouted.

Mega Charizard roared and lunged, a malevolent shadow fueled by fire and fury, just as Mega Houndoom released a heat wave that bent the metal railings and old grating out of shape. Alain covered his mouth as he felt Mega Charizard suck in the heat, impervious to it unlike him, and choked. Dark talons, aglow with a horrible crimson hue, reached for Mega Houndoom through the heat. The super-powered canine tried to leap to safety, but it was still in the throes of its attack and sluggish.

Sloppy, he remembered thinking.

But Malva, an elite among elites, had not achieved her household infamy by being sloppy. It was his last thought, abruptly silenced, before the heat became too overwhelming to remain standing and Mega Charizard sank its Dragon Claw into Mega Houndoom's belly, talons shattering the devil hound's sturdy bone armor and ripping into the coarse hide below.

Mega Houndoom roared in pain as it lost its balance under Mega Charizard's weight, and Malva cried out and clutched her belly with her searing hands, pumping herself full of even more heat. Mega Houndoom shrank as it fell, the temporary power borrowed from its Tamer-trainer reclaimed and with it, Malva's chance at survival.

Hands tugged at Alain's shoulders, so many hands, lifting him up, grabbing at him, knocking him out of his stupor and severing the blood connection with Mega Charizard. Before his eyes, Mega Charizard's razor scales bled from black to their original, sunburst orange and it shrank a foot, like someone had poked a hole in it and deflated it of whatever pumped it up. Not a bad way to think about it, Alain thought vaguely as he felt the rush of draconian power quicken his blood—Dragonsblood—once more.

It was like a reverse punch to the gut, and he could suddenly breathe in here again. The air cooled, the AC sucked up the excess smoke, and those disembodied hands carried him so he wouldn't have to do it himself. He wasn't sure he could after the beating he'd suffered vicariously through Mega Charizard. Stripped of its draconian transfusion, Charizard slumped and crawled toward Alain, one eye swollen shut and leaking blood, the rest of it as battered and burned as Alain.

But beyond Charizard, Alain's tired, blue eyes caught sight of Malva, also supported by hands attached to bodies he didn't recognize, all in white, as they strapped her to a gurney. One of them carried an

electric torch with an open flame, which he held just over her bleeding belly. Houndoom lay unmoving on the arena's floor, its boiling blood dripping through the metal grating and pinging on the floor far below. There were no hands reaching for it.

Sloppy, he thought again as he watched the white smocks wheel Malva out and his own army of smocks pulled him toward his own gurney. Red eyes, dancing as they reflected the torch's fickle flame, caught Alain's gaze and held it.

He remembered squinting, trying to see better, ignoring the other pair of eyes that watched from on high, Lysandre in his luxury booth, the only spectator to this freak show. And even now, in the haze of a dream and delirium, he couldn't really be sure if he saw it because it was there or because he wanted it to be. Malva smiled at him, her painted lips glossy with blood and lipstick, kissable and pouty.

It was always then, that very moment, no matter how hard he tried to hold onto it. The smocks wheeled him out and maybe he shouted, maybe he called for Charizard to tear them all apart, it didn't matter. Malva and her painted smile faded behind a veil of disgust and self-loathing. The bile rose in Alain's throat and the wool was pulled over his eyes. Those damn, grabby hands, pulling him this way and that, didn't they understand that he had to remember what came next?

A full-body tremor forced his eyes open, as it always did after this dream, and Alain jolted awake in bed. A thin sheet barely kept him modest, and his bare chest rose but didn't seem to fall as he sucked in harsh, shallow breaths. The bile in his throat was real, and he pressed a clammy hand over his chest to ease the burn. Slowly, his body wound down from the high, the terror and anxiety diffusing like the light through the threadbare, brown curtain over the room's lone window. He whipped his head to the right, half seeing and half still in the dream, but when he saw them, the last of the hallucination ebbed from his mind. Three Pokéballs, all accounted for just where he'd left them. Next to them, a bottle of Jack with the cap missing, three-quarters of the way empty.

"Wow, never seen anyone wake up so strung out."

The voice came from the dip in the bed next to him, and Alain forced himself to breathe, in and out. He turned to his left and came face to face with a pair of sleepy, violet eyes that weren't sleepy at all. Blonde hair, tangled and mussed from sleep (or rather, the lack thereof after the previous night's prurient escapades) fell over her shoulders and

pooled in between her bare breasts. A slender arm, tucked under the pillow, left little to the imagination as he followed the curve of her breasts down, but she didn't bat an eyelash at his wandering gaze.

"...Astrid," he managed sinking back into his pillow as flashes of the night before went off like bottle rockets in his mind's eye. Long, blonde hair he could really dig his fingers into, ass as tight as the grip she had on his wrist when he got just a little too close at the bar, a warning. That flicker of recognition—*I've seen you before*—and the Jack that erased all the time past.

It was the eyes, he remembered now as he looked into them. Eyes that could see in the dark, through the smoke and grime and haze of alcohol. Eyes that cut deep. He'd wanted to be cut last night. It had been a long time.

"You remembered my name." She quirked a perfectly shaped brow. "I guess I should reward you for that one."

She reached for him under the covers that might as well have not been there, useless as they were for warmth or coverage, and grabbed him before his mind could comprehend and tell his hand to move. Astrid was quick, and she was already rising on the bed, those blonde tresses shifting along her every curve and fuck, if there was ever a time to wallow in a hangover and just roll with it, this was it.

But in the haze of his building migraine, he could still see Malva's smirk out of the corner of his eye. *Not sloppy at all*, the sober part of his mind, long on a forced vacation, reminded him. And when he sucked in a sharp breath as Astrid shifted closer to him, it wasn't the obliviating escape only carnal pleasure could offer that sucked his lungs dry, but the too-familiar guilt stirring from slumber and rearing its ugly head. Never a moment's rest.

His hands got the message this time, and gently he took Astrid's arms and pushed back. She froze and looked up at him, quizzical. *Quizzical.* Mairin had always looked quizzical whenever he talked about anything other than food—

"Fuck," he hissed, ripping the image of the kid's scrunched up face from his mind in this extremely inappropriate situation. "Ah, sorry, not you, just my head—"

Shut up, shut up, shut up!

Astrid put up her hands and said nothing, a silent understanding. Or

maybe a calculated decision not to get dragged into whatever bullshit her temporary bedmate was snorting. Either way, good for her. He hated to see her slip away like that—last night really had been the best one he'd had in months, even discounting the Jack—-but the moment was ruined. His fault, again. The guilt liked reminding him.

But the guilt had nothing on that open bottle of Jack on the nightstand. Alain rolled over, careless of modesty and guessing Astrid cared even less, and took a swig from the cheap glass bottle. The liquor burned as it went down, and it mixed with the bile that still threatened to come up—*hi, still here, buddy!* But it went down with a hard swallow. By the time Astrid slipped out of bed and found her pants and bra, he was on his third swig.

She walked around the bed and tossed him his boxers, probably more for her sake than for his when he chanced a look down at his lap. *God, you're pathetic.* He offered the Jack as a silent thanks, but she declined. Another point for Astrid. He really did like her. Too bad.

"If you drink enough of that, will it dilute that precious Dragonsblood you Titans are so proud of?"

Alain let the bottle hang between his knees as he peered up at her. There was no malice in her question, just a passing curiosity. She had that ability, he'd noticed, to emotionally castrate and make it sound like a Sunday sermon. A quality he admired, if he was being honest and not on his way to getting wasted at nine in the goddamned morning. He frowned as his foggy mind tried to process her meaning. Dragonsblood. Titan.

"*Leave?"* His father's voice sounded hollow around the narrow neck of a bottle of whiskey, like talking out of a fishbowl. His laugh was worse, shaky and tinny, more like a cough to bury the sob somewhere underneath. *"We can't leave. They'll never* let *us leave."*

Shitty memories of a shitty life he'd turned his back on a long time ago. The whiskey was gone, then and now, and he missed it.

"Define enough."

He rolled to the side and set the empty bottle on the nightstand. His boxers still sat limp and sad in his lap.

Limp and sad. Nice, dude. You're really on a roll today. Nine in the goddamned morning.

Astrid kneeled down on the floor, her hair tied back and looked up at him with those eyes that cut. "I've got a minute if you need a hand to get to the shower."

He stared at her, unsure if he'd heard her right. It must have shown, because she made a face.

"You look like you need it," she said a little more softly.

Alain blinked and averted his gaze. "Huh. A Reaper who wants to help. Now I've seen everything."

Astrid got up and made a shallow huffing sound. "A Titan with two assholes. I've seen it all before."

She made her way back around the bed, rummaged around to collect her things, and slung her pack over her shoulder. Four Pokéballs clipped to her belt, at least one of which he was in no hurry to get acquainted with again. Breathing the same air as Mega Absol was like drinking acid from a champagne glass.

She was heading for the door, and that pathetic, sober part of his addled brain that still remembered he was a human being stoked the guilt in the pit of his belly, a last-ditch effort to remember that he wasn't as much of a dick as he liked to think. Rubbing his eyes, he called to her over his shoulder.

"Astrid, wait. I'm..."

Three words were all he could manage. God, just how far gone was he? Half a year since Malva got sloppy and he severed all ties with Lysandre, and he was still finding more dark holes to fall into.

Maybe Astrid felt sorry for him. Maybe she actually liked him a little, as much as you can learn to like someone beyond the excuse of anonymous sex. Or maybe she just wanted to screw with him. Reapers, the Dark Tamers, had a morbid sense of humor, he'd heard. Either way, he guessed he owed her one after this morning.

"Take it from a Reaper," she said, the edge of irritation gone from her raspy voice. He'd never heard her sound like that before, and he squinted to see her better. "When you're in a dark place, the best you can do is follow it to the bottom. The bottom's the best vantage you'll have to look up from."

For a blissful moment, he felt nothing. Thought of nothing. There was

just Astrid and her sharp eyes that could see through the heavy shadows that piled on top of him, burying him and filling his mouth and ears with tar. All gone for that one, aching moment as she stripped him bare with a single look. No pity, no hope, just a confirmation that she saw it, too. He wasn't all alone here.

What must it be like, he thought, to see into the heart of darkness and be so unmoved? God, he envied her.

If Astrid had a thought on the subject, she didn't voice it. She didn't need to. Perhaps if you wallow in darkness too long, it no longer scares you. Alain didn't have her gift, though, and when she averted her gaze, it all came crashing back and he was drifting again.

By the time he'd gathered what was left of his composure, she was already gone. With a tired sigh, he glanced back at the nightstand. Yeah, the bottle was still empty and he still needed to shower. The window was closed to block out the cold, and the air in the wooden room hung stale with a faint stench of old cigarette smoke and sex and cheap detergent. At least the sheets had been washed recently. With great effort, he staggered to his feet and balanced with a hand on the wall in front. His boxers fell to the floor, but he stepped over them and stumbled toward the bathroom.

An old toothbrush he'd picked up the day he left Lumiose City hung in the porcelain holder, its bristles frayed and flattened. He ignored it in favor of the toilet and relieved himself. The shower was not the worst he'd ever seen. No curtain, but the water was hot enough. He let it wash over him, barely feeling when the hot turned to cold—the Jack kept him warm either way. And eventually, by some miracle, he was out, having kept his balance and now smelling vaguely of soap. The mirror was clear, and he stared at his dripping reflection for a moment.

Three-day-old stubble dusted his cheeks and chin, prickly and hiding an old scar on his jaw—another bottle of whiskey from long ago, his father's. There were bags under his brilliant, blue eyes, thick as shiners and giving him a ghastly look that aged him far beyond his twenty-seven years. No wonder Astrid had been moved to offer some help. His hair was a bit long, dark and curling in its damp state, but he barely noticed. It would do what it wanted. He reached for his toothbrush but had no toothpaste. Whatever. At least the water could get the sour taste of cheap whiskey out of his mouth until he could purchase more.

His belly sagged just a little, months of relative inactivity and too much booze taking their toll, but he couldn't be bothered to care much. Scars, thick and small and long and ugly, bisected his abdomen in places, most of them faint, one particularly nasty over his right pectoral. A shiny, angry gouge where Mega Charizard had taken a terrible blow to the chest from a monster Alain wasn't even sure he wanted to remember existed.

His stomach growled, demanding something other than alcohol, and he finished his business in the bathroom, toweled off, and dressed. The three Pokéballs on his nightstand he clipped to his belt. The empty bottle of Jack he left for the next person to discard. The migraine he'd been nursing since he woke up was in full swing now, and he downed a glass of water filled up from the bathroom sink. It didn't help, but it seemed like the right thing to do. With a final glance back at the messy bed, just a little disappointed, Alain hiked his pack over his shoulder and left the room.

The lobby had a small cafeteria, where he bought a couple sandwiches for the road, not bothering to dwell on the thought that they were undoubtedly days old and stale. The room he'd already paid for the night before, and good thing, too. He'd had enough trouble counting the change the cafeteria worker handed him back with his sandwiches.

Outside, the sun was up and the sky was clear. Spring had come early to western Kalos and brought with it the warm ocean currents from the Orange Islands far to the southeast. It was just after ten in the morning now, and of course the bars were closed. Didn't these people ever hear of day drinking? This town, if it could even be called that, was a traveler's thru point on Route Eleven. No one lived here aside from the owners and employees of the few inns, bars, and laundromats clustered together. Not even the whores stayed around much, preferring to follow the tide of travelers with the seasons.

"Hey, hon," a topless woman called from the second story of the local whorehouse. Her heavy breasts squished on the windowpane like they wanted to leap out and be free of this place. "Little early for a walk, why not come to bed?"

Alain spared her a passing glance. Redhead, round face, cute with a coy smile.

"I prefer blondes," he called back.

The whore gave him her best pouty face, but he tuned out whatever she said next to entice him. It wasn't a lie, he did like blondes. But he wasn't in the mood either way, and there were better things to spend money on. Except the damned bars were closed.

Food, the part of him that still made sense begged. *Get some food.*

The town that wasn't a town only stretched the equivalent of a couple city blocks, and soon Alain was back on the well-trodden path that was Route Eleven, headed northeast toward the coast. He didn't have a real destination in mind so long as his feet continued to carry him as far away from Lumiose as possible. More shitty memories of yet another shitty life he'd turned his back on not long ago. He seemed to do that a lot, turn his back on what wasn't working.

"*Alain?"*

He hissed and whipped his head around, following the phantom voice he was so sure he'd heard just as he had so many times before. His migraine rewarded him with the equivalent of a brick to the head, and there was no sign of another person in the thinning woods. Mairin wasn't here.

The woods opened up to a rolling series of rocky hills. Somewhere in there was a vast cavern known as Reflection Cave. Alain was not in the mood to reflect any further, at least not without some food in his stomach, so he wandered a good mile off the designated path and found a patch of fresh grass under a tree with enough leaves and spring blooms to offer some meager semblance of shade. Here, he sat down with a heavy sigh. He unclipped the three Pokéballs at his belt and released them all at once.

Charizard, blue wings folded, landed with a soft thud and snorted black smoke from its nostrils. Next to it and towering a staggering five feet over Charizard at the top of its shale-crusted crown and still growing, Tyrantrum bared yellowed teeth that were too big to fit inside its oversized jaw. Its ruddy, leathery skin was riddled with old scars and scuffs, but the mane of spiky, white feathers was puffed out and as clean as could be. It lowered its massive head toward Alain, tiny, two-toed front claws clacking, and fixed a beady, black eye on him.

But it was Heliolisk, the three-foot, frilled-neck lizard that boldly pushed past its behemoth brethren and poked its black-scaled snout into Alain's chest. The yellow lizard made a rhythmic clicking sound

and peered up at Alain, a slimy, pink tongue slinking in between tiny, sharp teeth and licking its blue eye.

Alain cracked a smile. "How's that taste, girl?"

Heliolisk swished its yellow, lash-like tail and twitched its head. Alain usually took that as a sign that the strange pseudo-Dragon was pleased.

"Go find some breakfast, guys," he said to the three Pokémon. "I'll be here. Stay away from the town down south."

Tyrantrum made a snorting sound that could have passed for a laugh if it didn't sound so fucking terrifying. It lumbered about and peered into the thick of the woods to the west, sniffed the air, and headed toward them. Its massive hind legs, each as thick around as a tree trunk, boomed with each step. A flock of Fletchling squawked and fled a tree they'd been roosting in at the red dinosaur's passing.

Heliolisk scampered after it on its back legs, waddling and somehow able to remain balanced, but it moved fast and crawled up Tyrantrum's leg to ride on its thorny back.

"You going?" Alain looked up at Charizard, his oldest Pokémon.

The orange pseudo-Dragon watched him carefully, almost concerned, if Pokémon could look concerned. But with Charizard, it wasn't the look that gave it away. Alain reached out a hand, palm first, and Charizard touched its snout to his palm, silently communicating everything its look alone could not.

"I'm okay, just gonna rest here a bit," Alain reassured it. "Go on, before Tyrantrum cleans out the whole forest."

Charizard took that as reassurance enough and took off into the sky, floating in the direction Tyrantrum and Heliolisk had gone. Alone, Alain fished one of the sandwiches he'd purchased from his pack and bit into it. It was bland and stale, as he'd expected, but it went down without a fuss and his stomach thanked him with a satisfied rumble. He ended up wolfing down two of the three he'd purchased in about as many bites, then gulped down half his canteen of water. Somewhere in the distance, he heard Tyrantrum's mighty roar, and another group of birds shrieked and took to the skies en masse.

Always so dramatic, he thought to himself with a small smile.

Even as a Tyrunt, the ancient dinosaur had never been one to do anything quietly and without as much attention as it could gobble up. As one of a small group of its kind discovered living in seclusion in the mountains far to the north of Dendemille Town, attention was as precious a commodity as a bloody meal and a safe place to sleep. That was, until the Apep Dynasty's rangers discovered them.

Alain's stomach churned at the thought of his past familial ties. The Apep Dynasty, one of three great Dragon Tamer clans that had scattered from Sinnoh millennia ago, was a shadow that followed him wherever he went, even after all these years. No matter how far he ran, how strong he became, there was always that reminder that everything he was, from the Old Blood that coursed strong in his veins to the very personal, very intimate connection he'd learned to cultivate with Charizard that resulted in its Mega Evolution, all flowed back to that accursed clan. The control he exercised as easily as breathing over Dragons and their descendants, the name, the very presence he brought when he entered a room, those hushed whispers and the stares—*he's one of* them*, right?*—all of it belonged to the Apep Dynasty.

His father had known this, and now he belonged to them in death as he had all his life.

Sycamore had taken him in when he ran, a lost teenager trailing death and little else. Fifteen and alone in the world, that didn't sink in until days turned to weeks, then months. Years rolled by, and no one came for him. Titans didn't look for their own, he'd known this and Sycamore probably did, too. Otherwise, why risk harboring a vanither?

Deserter.

They may as well have branded the curse to his forehead, a scarlet letter to remind everyone who passed him that he was not to be trusted. Vanithers didn't stick around, didn't help when the going got tough. But Sycamore taught him how.

Those years, in many ways, were the best of Alain's life. A decade spent learning from Sycamore's wisdom, absorbing his enthusiasm for the unknown, the thirst for knowledge contagious the more time he spent assisting the eccentric professor. Alain caught a thirst of his own, or maybe it was one he'd always carried and learned to swallow while he still feared the fate his father had won. Even in his travels around Kalos, collecting data for Sycamore as his eyes and ears in the

field, there was no quenching that thirst that was fast becoming a rapacious monster with a will of its own. He had to find another way.

Lysandre had offered that new way, a path to strength and power free from the yoke of blood ties and forced filial piety. Mega Evolution, he'd said, was the answer to Alain's prayers.

"*You don't even know me. I don't pray.*"

Lysandre just smiled, the sage teacher savoring his student's proud insolence before the wool is lifted, the secret revealed, and the world of possibilities becomes just a little bit bigger. *"Everybody prays, my boy. Only some of us get an answer."*

The first time he'd seen it, Alain did get the sense that *something* was listening. Mega Evolution was a power he'd never dreamed of, beyond the beyond. With this kind of power, he could do something. *Be* something other than what he'd always been. No longer a perpetually wandering vanither, cast out and disgraced by virtue of his solitary existence, but something solid, real. Something his, to hold on to and to protect.

But whatever dreams he'd harbored, whatever new realities he'd fashioned for himself no longer mattered. They shattered, dashed upon the rocks of guilt and sucked down a dark void that ate into his flesh no matter how much distance he put between Lumiose and himself.

Mairin was probably still in Lumiose with Lysandre, her round face pressed against the glass as a team of highly educated nurses and doctors hunched over her comatose Chespin. High as Alain was—he'd even caught the ear of the Champion of Hoenn in his rise to power—a thirteen-year-old girl could still slash him down to size with one pitiful, accusatory look.

"*You did this.*"

Where had he been when his father drank himself into a coma, alone in their empty house? Where had he been when the cargo hold of Steven Stone's private jet blasted open and Mairin nearly fell to her death? Where had he been when she was all alone, and her Chespin stumbled upon something no one was meant to see? What was the point of getting stronger when all it got him were tears and curses?

Running was what he did best. Run and hide, little Dragon. No one would shelter a dog that bites, especially one even the others didn't

want. All those years, and he was back to square one. A wanderer with nowhere to go and nowhere to turn back to. And now, there didn't even seem to be a point in trying.

Hissing stirred him from his thoughts, and he realized he must have dozed off, half dreaming under that budding tree. The shade had shifted, the sun was high in the sky, and the smell of carrion and ego saturated the air. Sniffling, Alain shifted and cursed the numbness in his rear and back from sitting in the same position too long. He reached for his canteen and chugged down the rest of the water, spilling some on his jacket.

The hissing sound he'd heard was Heliolisk defending its share of the day's meal from its bulkier companions. Charizard curled back its lips, but it didn't attempt to snap at the thieving lizard. Tyrantrum didn't even care, it wasn't worth the effort. Two Gogoat carcasses lay on the ground in a pool of congealed blood. Tyrantrum was feasting on one, while Charizard went to town on the other and Heliolisk ripped off choice slices when Charizard wasn't looking. By the looks of it, they'd been at it for a while. Ribs had been stripped bare, soft internal organs were all but vanished, and the sky stalkers had already shown up.

A flock of Mandibuzz and Vullaby circled overhead, drawn by the scent of sunbaked blood. One bold Mandibuzz actually dared to land near Tyrantrum and waddled toward the broken Gogoat's head, perhaps looking to gouge out a soft, tender eyeball. Surprisingly, it was Heliolisk, the lone female of Alain's motley crew, that shrieked and leaped after the intruding buzzard in Tyrantrum's stead. Heliolisk extended its webbed collar, which began to spark with electricity, and screamed as it hurled itself toward Mandibuzz. The buzzard squawked in surprise and tripped over itself to get airborne. An arcing Thundershock followed it, barely grazing the puffy bird but getting the message across. No other birds dared to land while the three draconian Pokémon feasted. Tyrantrum barely even looked up at the commotion, instead shoving its bloody snout against Gogoat's side and turning it over to get to the uneaten meat there.

Alain yawned and stood up to stretch. His migraine had faded to a tolerable ache, and his stomach was no longer doing somersaults. He considered having another sandwich, but the smell of death was redolent enough to make him reconsider until after the Dragons were done.

He shouldered his pack, then headed toward the base of the rocky hills to the west. It felt good to get up and walk a bit now that he

wasn't half drunk and starving. He briefly considered heading back to the thruway town for a fresh bottle of Jack, but decided against it. Something in him wanted to reach the top of this nearest hill first.

It was steeper than it looked, and the only paths were those frequented by nimble Skiddo and Gogoat that made the inhospitable terrain their home. None were about now, probably having learned their lesson to stay hidden while Tyrantrum was up and about. Alain's legs began to ache with the exertion after so long without much of it. The warm air soon became uncomfortably sticky, and his shirt stuck to his back. But each step brought him a little higher, a little closer to the open, blue sky.

After twenty minutes, he was at the apex of the rocky mound and out of breath. The hills went on and on, rolling like some gravelly, grey ocean frozen in time and space, and he just a lost soul treading water among them. Taking a deep breath and ignoring the phantom sensation of water under his boots, Alain looked to the sky. Endless blue, not a cloud in sight, stretched on forever on all sides. All these years under that same, unchanging sky. Did it mean anything at all? Was it even worth looking for?

"*When you're in a dark place, the best you can do is follow it to the bottom.*"

He was at the bottom of the darkest pit of himself, mind and body and soul, lost and adrift with not a soul in sight to offer clemency. Not that he deserved it. But something, just to hold onto... Anything at all would do. *Anything.*

"*The bottom's the best vantage you'll have to look up from.*"

Alain's shoulders slumped and he squeezed his eye closed, stinging from overexposure to sunlight. He rubbed them and shuffled his feet, shaking the vertigo from his limbs from staring up at the sky high above. And when he opened them, something in the distance made him stare.

A structure, tall and sprawling, stabbed the uninterrupted sky far to the north, where the grey sea bled into the blue. He squinted and shielded his eyes from the sun, but it was hard to make out much detail from so far away. A castle, perhaps? The highest point glittered in the sunlight like the searchlight beacon of a lighthouse to guide sailors lost at sea back home.

A lighthouse...

He shrugged off his pack and unzipped the small, front pocket, which contained a map of Kalos worn at the edges and folded over itself a hundred times. He'd had this copy for years, scribbled notes about the various cities and regions he'd visited on missions first for Sycamore, then for Lysandre. He traced the winding, terrestrial path of Route Eleven north, east, north again with a finger until he landed on Shalour City, an old settlement and the last one remaining on the Gold Coast, the resting place of the setting sun. And that castle...

"The Tower of Mastery," he read the faded map marker.

It was familiar, maybe something he'd heard in passing in a conversation recently. Frowning, he suddenly thought of Lysandre. It was him that had mentioned the tower, he was sure of it. Why? Shalour was a coastal city, known sometimes for its fishing industry and always for its gold mines. Many said the Gold Coast was no pretty homage to nature, but to man's greed. Either way, the beaches were said to be littered with gold dust washed up on shore that shone under the light of the setting sun, turning the bay into a golden coast for true. Alain had never been.

But he had a mind to go now. Astrid's words lingered in his mind, probably unimportant but somehow persistent. Maybe it was just a coincidence, so many things were. She could have said it to anyone in a similar state and it could have meant something. But that wasn't the point. The point was she'd said it to him, and now he looked up from his lonely vantage, limbs aching with the weight of the guilt he carried and the trek to the top of this frozen ocean, and he saw something real.

The top of the Tower of Mastery glistened in the light of the setting sun, like someone had fitted a fat diamond on top of it precisely to reach out to anyone lost in the sea of despair or solitude, wanderers with nowhere else to go.

Come this way, it seemed to beckon.

He took a step forward without thinking before catching himself. It was a steep drop down to the valley between this hill and the next.

"Whoa there," he said to himself.

A low, rumbling growl answered him, and he was a little surprised to find Charizard standing behind him. Blood splattered its snout from its earlier feast, and it was almost a laughable sight with the way it cocked its head as if in question.

Alain turned to face Charizard and managed a shadow of a grin. He used to be good at smiling—smirking, really. He had it on good authority, mostly feminine in nature.

"Feel like flying today?" he ventured as he reached out and patted Charizard's long neck.

Charizard curled back its lips and growled softly, but it swept its leathery wings forward and nudged Alain in the side, a friendly gesture he'd learned to count on in their years together. Alain took a knee and fished out a set of leg bracers from his pack, then strapped them to his thighs one at a time. Charizard's scales could cut through human flesh if you looked at them the wrong way. His jeans would be little more than tissue paper after a couple minutes of flying without protection.

"Let's get the others first."

Though normally a violent and egotistical species, this Charizard had always been mellower than others Alain had come across. It was evident now by the way Charizard hunched over so Alain could swing a leg over its side and settle in safely. He patted Charizard's shoulder, and it took off in a blast of wind back down the side of the mountain, where Alain would recall Tyrantrum and Heliolisk before turning north toward Shalour City.

With the late afternoon sky and the balmy, spring breeze at his back, for the first time in a long time, Alain let himself enjoy the feel of Charizard's sinewy muscles pumping beneath him, climbing higher, as together they soared toward that beckoning beacon, a piece of home he'd never known before.

2. Chapter 2

Wanderer
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

She didn't realize she was bleeding until it began to fill her mouth beyond capacity and dribbled down her chin. The taste had become so commonplace that she could hardly discern between the tangy, metallic blood and her saliva, the sweat that dribbled over her lips, the stale air energized with static that was more adrenaline than electric. Korrina spit a glob of blood and saliva on the floor to her right and wiped her mouth. Red stained the grooves in between her teeth as she panted.

Her opponent, up to her chest in height and covered in blue and black fur, watched her with steady, red eyes that nevertheless belied its compounding exhaustion. Lucario had nerves of steel, literally, but in a one-on-one spar with its master even it had to watch its back. Not wanting to give Korrina an opening, Lucario lunged and fisted its elongated paws, the wicked spikes embedded in the backs of its hands slashing the air as it flew.

Korrina grunted and jumped. She was fast—a blur of blonde and black as she reached out with a hand and pivoted on her left foot. Lucario saw her coming and tried to feint, but she caught it in the neck with her elbow just as it drove its fisted paw into her collarbone. Their momentum spun them around, and Korrina's leg bent at the last minute to knee Lucario in the stomach. Its weight toppled them both, and they fell to the mat in a heap, each scrambling to right themselves and resume the match.

"You're too reckless. If you continue to allow yourself to be hit, you'll fall."

Korrina spared the old man a scathing glance. "I'm fine, Grandpa. I can handle a little roughhousing."

Gurkinn, a rugose old man who'd lost all the hair on his head except for a pair of bushy, untrimmed eyebrows and two long, white mustachios that fell below his chin, shifted his weight. Even in his old age, his piercing, green eyes could detect what his headstrong granddaughter could not.

"Cry wolf enough and the wolf will come running," he cautioned.

Korrina righted herself and swatted her long, blonde ponytail out of her face. Sweat ran down her neck and under the low collar of her black tank top, soaking through, but she barely felt the heat. Lucario regained its stance just a few feet in front of her, waiting for her to make her next move.

Sweat dripped into her eyes, green like Gurkinn's, and she rubbed them furiously, an idea forming. This was child's play, and at twenty-six-years-old, she was far from being a child. The sweatband on her left wrist contained a small razor embedded in the folds for just such an occasion, and she peeled back the white cotton to expose it. Slashing her right palm was then a simple matter of applied pressure.

Gurkinn noticed her bleeding hand and stepped toward the training mats. "What are you doing?"

"Crying wolf," Korrina bit out.

She advanced on Lucario, whose pupils narrowed at the smell of her blood. But instead of lashing out, it kneeled down and bowed its head, understanding. Its long ears twitched, perhaps hearing the thunder of her heartbeat as she went through with her whimsical plan.

I can do it, she reassured herself. *If I don't, then I'll never...*

Korrina pressed her bloody hand to Lucario's broad forehead and jerked at the surge of power, like a violent static shock, that jumped between them.

"Korrina, stop!" Gurkinn shouted.

But she didn't stop, and it was already done. Her blood seeped into the fur on Lucario's forehead and took on a life of its own, enveloping the jackal in ribbons of red that engorged its muscles. Lucario's legs grew longer and it raised its head taller, to a height with Korrina. Its tail fluffed out, bushy and golden, and the thick feelers that hung from the back of its neck engorged to match its paws—muscled and raw.

Korrina stepped back, her skin abuzz with the energy that jumped from her to Lucario as it Mega Evolved. Hypersensitive, the air felt colder on her bare arms, the acrid taste of blood on her tongue more sour and biting. She clenched her fists, and the knuckles popped. Mega Lucario crouched and growled low in its throat.

"Korrina!" Gurkinn said more forcefully.

She ignored him and lunged, her body moving on instinct and muscle memory she'd been born with, fluid and deadly, and Mega Lucario moved to defend. They clashed, and Mega Lucario swatted her fist away with a paw and angled left for a kick. Korrina felt it coming and, not even bothering to waste time looking, twisted low and jabbed with her elbow to block. Spring boarding off her own momentum, she looped her leg around and struck Mega Lucario with all her strength in the ribs, her shin connecting at just the right angle. Mega Lucario grunted and tried to reposition just as pain exploded in Korrina's side —the same spot where she'd hit her Pokémon. Sucking in a breath through gritted teeth, she hit the mat with a hand and flipped as Mega Lucario recovered and came at her with a vengeful punch.

"Stop this at once!" Gurkinn shouted.

But he was barely heard over the flurry of kicks and punches and feints and double feints as Mega Lucario tangoed with its trainer almost too fast for the human eye to follow. It was going easy on her, she knew it. No human, not even a Bellatrix, a Fighting Tamer born with heightened senses that lent themselves to an unmatched fighting spirit, could match it. But she'd sure as hell give it her best shot.

"Haughh!"

Korrina spun on the mat and jabbed hard, but Mega Lucario grabbed her fist and pushed back with more strength than any number of years of hard training could ever hope to outclass. Korrina fell back to the mat, but not before using her own relative frailty to her advantage. Rolling her shoulder, she swung around and rammed Mega Lucario as hard as she could in the stomach. The jackal-headed Pokémon gagged and yipped in surprise, staggering a little, and Korrina saw stars. She rolled on the mat in a tumble of limbs and doubled over to clutch her stomach. Pain lanced through her body like someone had stuck her with some rusty hangers and electrocuted them.

Shuffling, then flowing, yellow pants in her line of sight—or was that just the stars dancing? She tried to stand, but strong arms grabbed her by the collar of her shirt and threw her back bodily. Tears blurred her vision and snot loosened from her nose as the pain flooded her consciousness anew. Warm hands fell upon her shoulders, but she jerked away and struggled to her hands and knees.

Each breath was a stab to the gut, and she let her head hang as she waited for the agony to pass. Her long, thick ponytail fell over her shoulder and pooled on the floor. Coughing, Korrina peered through

her sweaty bangs and found Mega Lucario similarly thrown back and holding its middle, though it looked to be taking the beating with more dignity. Unlike her, its bones were plated with steel and could take a hit. Anger flushed through her body and heated her face. She was shaking, and Gurkinn once again laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Korrina," he said gently. His veiny Machamp, a beastly Pokémon with four arms and more raw power than any Fighter Korrina had ever handled, stood between Korrina and Lucario, daring them to get up and resume the fighting.

Swallowing the pain and deciding right then and there that she would wallow in it no longer, Korrina forced herself to stand up, swaying just a little.

"Damnit," she swore. "One hit. One fucking hit."

Mega Lucario watched her, cool as a cucumber and feeling none of the anger that coursed through her. It could probably take a thousand hits like that and still keep going. She took one, and she was writhing on the ground like a coward.

"One hit from a Bellatrix is not just one hit," Gurkinn said.

"That's not good enough!"

Silence stretched, and her shout echoed in the wide, indoor training arena. As quickly as it had come, Korrina's anger left her with each shallow, pathetic breath she took, and the flush on her cheeks burned with something far more insidious.

"Grandpa, I'm... I'm sorry, I didn't mean..."

Mega Lucario took a knee, and like a tired sigh before hitting the pillow after a long day, the power that had transformed it ebbed from its body and flowed back to Korrina, light as a feather. Lucario looked up at her back in its normal state.

"That's your problem," Gurkinn said softly but not unkindly. "You don't know what you mean. Sometimes suffering is necessary to achieve victory, but the two are not one and the same."

Korrina wiped her forehead and tried to breathe. He meant well. He always had. Gurkinn was once a powerful Bellator in his own right, and he'd taught Korrina everything he knew. She knew the techniques, the moves, all of it. Their kind fought with a level of fortitude and

grace and agility incomprehensible to plebs and other Tamers alike. But there was something weighing her down and pulling her punches. It was ugly and deceitful, and it had followed her since she was a girl.

"And sometimes we only suffer because we choose to."

Blinking, she fixed Gurkinn with a cold glare. "Why would I choose this?"

"To hold on to a target you do not want to admit you can no longer hit."

Whatever scathing rebuttal Korrina could come up with died in her throat. The shame followed the anger, gone with a shaky breath, and all that was left was the ugliness she'd carried around all these years. Without it, what would be left of her?

"I understand," Gurkinn said softly, almost sad, if someone so old could still have the energy to be sad.

Korrina's bright, green eyes watered with unshed tears. Not because he was right, though he always was, but because she just didn't know what to do about it.

"I'm sorry for lashing out," she said, meaning it.

He held out a hand to her, and she took it after a moment's hesitation. "We all fall victim to our passions, for better or for worse."

He trailed off, and she watched him carefully, searching for something that he always kept so well hidden. But as usual, it was gone too fast.

"Please think about what I said. What you seek... It won't come to you until you're ready to accept it without fear."

She nodded, not willing to argue with the one person who had always done what he could to help her, even if it came at a cost that cut from the soul a little more every day.

"I'm going to clean up. See you for dinner?" She managed a small smile for him.

"Of course, my dear."

Korrina waved to Lucario. "C'mon."

She felt Gurkinn's eyes on her back as she left the training arena and

headed to the hallway. This arena was a private weight room and exercise floor in the basement separate from the Gym arena on the main floor, where locally employed trainers came to work out their Pokémon and take lessons from the Shalour Gym Leader, a job which until four years ago had belonged to Gurkinn. His old age had hit him like a stroke without the life-threatening attack—one morning, he woke up and he was half the man he'd once been. It was too much to carry on his responsibilities to the Gym and maintain his withering health, so Korrina took over the daily responsibilities in his place.

Lucario walked along beside her, perpetually hunched over with its front paws hanging limply and its bushy tail swishing, tickling the backs of her bare legs. She reached out a hand and scratched it behind one of its huge, fleshy ears. The affectionate gesture earned her a playful nudge in the shoulder.

"I'll get there," she whispered to her strongest Pokémon. "We both will."

They headed upstairs and bypassed the entrance to the Gym, instead using the stairs to climb up to the third floor. Korrina had the entire floor to herself, though there were three additional bedrooms down the hall for guests. Gurkinn's quarters were a floor above, the master's quarters. She didn't mind the privacy even if it meant a smaller room. She didn't have much to fill it with, anyway.

The bed was the only thing worth noticing, a queen with a bland, linen comforter. The walls were bare and off-white with hardly a picture or poster to decorate them, and even the desk in the corner was cleared of loose papers and books. She did have a balcony, though, and it overlooked the huge, wrap-around porch that covered the width of the back of the tower and offered the best view in town of the ocean with nothing to obstruct it. She opened the door and leaned over the balcony, breathing deeply.

Lucario jumped up on the railing and gazed out over the edge. Below, past the reach of the wooden porch where the grass gave way to the golden sands that had enchanted poets and mariners alike for centuries, a large, rotund Pokémon sat on its rear. It had picked a spot in the shade of the palm trees and munched on spindly, leafy sticks of bamboo one of the gardeners had brought out for its meal earlier. Pangoro moved slowly, its dark eyes droopy and its temperament lackadaisical, but stoke its hidden furor and the panda was a bulldozer on steroids. As a Pancham, Pangoro had been Korrina's first Pokémon, raised from her childhood when her mother was still alive.

Snoozing on the beach and sunning lay Korrina's Blaziken, a seven-foot, leggy Fighter parrot that looked like a child had glued together parts of other Pokémon and scribbled them over with red. Legs like a hairy Vigaroth covered in fur, talon-tipped fists reminiscent of Lucario's cruel hands, a severe, curved beak set between two sunken, blue eyes, and a feathered head bushy as a headdress gave Blaziken the look of some evil spirit sent to devour the livers of strong men chained to rocks in penance for their greed. It probably would, too. Blaziken, unlike its smaller cousin hovering just out of reach, preferred to roast and rip its meat, large or small, innards or flesh.

Hawlucha, four feet from its bushy talons to the magnificent crest on its wide head, kept a wary eye on Blaziken as it cleaned its brilliantly colored feathers in the sun. Blaziken's phlegmatic disposition as it sunbathed and stretched its long legs in the sand could shift at any moment. Hawlucha was Korrina's most recent Pokémon, having been around only a few months and still learning the pecking order. Fighters kept a strict hierarchy among themselves, bowing to one another to show deference and settling any perceived slights or threats with punches, much like their human Bellator counterparts. Where most Pokémon were territorial, clan-oriented, or otherwise formed groups to ensure survival, Fighters functioned on the peripheries of their kind, working together only when required, deferring to strength and prowess always to divide territories. Blaziken would not move against Hawlucha, out of boredom and respect for Korrina. But mostly because Pangoro would have started bulldozing—the hefty panda had taken a strange liking to the flamboyant bird—and Blaziken was never in the mood to deal with the bear's temper.

"Go ahead," Korrina said to Lucario. "I'll be down after a shower."

Lucario leaped off the edge of the balcony and landed with a graceful whoosh in the sand. Blaziken's eyes flew open, its mood as mercurial as a teenaged girl's, and Hawlucha's keen observation paid off. It hopped back a safe distance, kept its head low, and spread its enormous red, white, and green wings for balance in an awkward kowtow. Lucario, generally placid but possessed of unmatched perspicacity, calmly eyed its fellow Fighters and loped to the shore to wet its paws. Pangoro barely noticed the jackal and went back to its eating, but Blaziken kept an eye on it—Lucario was the strongest of them. Best not to let it out of sight.

Korrina watched her four Pokémon on the beach, thoughtful. They got along as well as Pokémon of different species could be expected to, though Fighters tended to keep themselves to themselves more than

others. A good Bellatrix could teach them to trust and depend on each other, as Gurkinn constantly reminded her. Still so much to learn, she thought begrudgingly. But she was getting there, and so were her young Pokémon willing to sit together on the beach without supervision.

Stripping mechanically, Korrina tossed her soiled workout clothes in the hamper next to the toilet and turned on the shower full blast. The little blood she'd spilled swirled on the white tile and disappeared down the silver drain, leaving only the bruises she would feel in the morning. She hung her head under the spigot and let the hot water soak her waist-length blonde hair, turning it dark.

She had hardly any scars on her body. Bellators fought with their fists and feet, elbows and knees, the heels of their palms, sometimes their heads—metaphorically and physically. Nothing like a head butt to the stomach of a guy twice your size at a running start to cut him down a notch or two. In the course of her twenty-six years, Korrina had been bruised over every inch of her body, but they had faded and healed in time, replaced with fresh ones in the next fight. She'd broken more bones before the age of fifteen than most people break in their entire lives.

As she washed, her fingers brushed one of the few scars she did have —wide and wrinkled, perpetually a shade of pink noticeably darker than her skin and as long as her forefinger—over her left patella. The kneecap bone, bent out of shape and shattered, reassembled with twine and two metal screws thanks to three surgeries (the Hyper Potions alone couldn't put that jigsaw puzzle back together), the last falling on her twelfth birthday. Gurkinn had been there when she woke from the anesthesia.

"*You're safe now.*"

Gurkinn's promise hurt more than the pain waking up from surgery, the worst pain of her life. Six months in a wheelchair, and another two months in crutches. A year of physical therapy as much for her atrophied leg as for her confidence and the fear that plagued her child's body. It had taken months, maybe years off her physical and emotional advancement—Hyper Potions were lethal to children in large and continuous doses, so the old fashioned cure of time and patience was her only real option. And there was Gurkinn's guilt about the matter...

Korrina pushed the thought out of her mind before it could drift too

far and scrubbed herself clean. She switched off the shower spigot and wrung out her hair, toweled off, and changed into clean clothes. A white T-shirt and jeans rolled up to the knees, flip-flops she could kick off to dip her feet in the ocean. Her damp hair hung loose about her shoulders. No reason to worry about it once it was brushed smooth.

Korrina headed outside to join her Pokémon. The still-skittish Hawlucha squawked at her arrival and hopped toward her, enjoying a scratch behind its head. Korrina smiled and walked past the bird toward Blaziken, who watched her with its keen eyes.

"Catching up on your tan, huh?" Korrina said.

Blaziken sat up and crossed its long legs to peer at her better. Whatever hierarchical system her Pokémon had established for themselves, Korrina walked among them easily with the assurance that they would defer to her, even if it meant cooperating among themselves. She walked around Blaziken and ran her fingers through its gold-feathered headdress, which earned her a surprisingly gentle purr.

"Someone's in a good mood," she teased.

Pangoro, having plowed through its daily bushel of bamboo, shook the scraps from its belly and rolled over onto its back. Korrina grinned and threw her arms around the heavyset panda's chest, running her fingers over its belly. Pangoro grumbled happily and rolled her onto its stomach, holding her in place with its massive paws and spraying sand everywhere.

Korrina laughed through the ache in her belly where her strong kick had smacked Mega Lucario and injured her as a result. "Goro goro," she said playfully as she tickled Pangoro's belly.

The salty air was already caking her bare arms and face in a fine layer of crystalline mist, but she didn't mind. Pangoro let her slip free and got up to shake out the sand from its black and white fur. Hawlucha ambled close, its wings half spread and the thick, finger-like claws at the joints curled into fists that could punch through solid rock.

Korrina was about to get herself something cold to drink from the mini fridge on the porch and join her Pokémon to sunbathe, but something caught her eye to the south beyond the Tower of Mastery toward Shalour City proper.

"What is that?"

She squinted and shielded her eyes with a hand to block out the sun. Something was floating toward her in the sky, a black dot that grew steadily larger. Hawlucha squawked, an irritating caw reminiscent of the low timber of Murkrow and Honchkrow. Its keen eyes had picked up on the encroaching figure, too.

The dark spot grew wings, and the shadows swathing it bled to orange as it neared. Blaziken got to its feet and turned its wicked beak to the air, sniffing, eyes narrowed.

"I think... Is that a person on that Pokémon?"

Hawlucha squawked again and teetered on its bushy feet, debating whether or not to fly off. Lucario remained near the shore, watching and waiting with palpable aplomb. Korrina's damp, loose hair blew in the sea breeze about her shoulders, platinum sun-kissed ribbons. The approaching figure slowly came into view.

"That's a Charizard," she said, taking a step back.

Blaziken was at her back, its talon-tipped fingers clicking as it cracked its knuckles. Charizard were rare, non-native to Kalos except under the tutelage of a skilled trainer.

Or Tamer, Korrina thought.

Charizard swooped toward the beach, having noticed Korrina and her Pokémon, and its rider guided it into a smooth landing on the sand. A magnificent creature towering about nine feet, Charizard folded its leathery blue wings and hunched over to let its rider dismount. The young man shouldered a travel-weary rucksack and wore Brigandine caliber chaps over his pants, the new lightweight alternative to a bulky saddle. His violet jacket was rolled up at the sleeves and exposed the light dusting of hair on his muscular forearms, which matched the mop of windblown hair on his head. He lowered his flight goggles around his neck and revealed a pair of sparkling blue eyes as clear and placid as the sea on a cloudless afternoon. The set of his jaw was square-cut and hard, the frown he wore as natural as if he'd been born with it. But the moment he laid eyes on Korrina, another human after whatever lengthy, lonely trip he'd made all the way here, he smiled easily in that boy-next-door way Korrina would often overhear other girls giggling about when she was a teenager. This was no dreamy teenager in front of her now.

"Hey," he said. "Sorry, but do you live here?"

Korrina, salt-kissed and barefoot and her blonde hair wild and loose in the wind must have looked a sight to this handsome stranger surrounded by her four beefy Pokémon, the Nereid caught bathing by the peeping youth, her guardians rallied about her ready to defend her honor. But Korrina needed no help in the matter.

"You better be sorry," she said. "Who the hell do you think you are flying in here unannounced? This is private property."

In case the message wasn't clear enough, Blaziken stepped around her and fixed its blazing gaze on Charizard, daring it to take another step closer. The two Fire-types sized each other up, and Charizard bared its teeth in a low warning growl.

The young man put up his hands. "I'm not looking for trouble, okay?"

"Answer the question."

He regarded her, blue eyes catching the afternoon sunlight in a way that made it hard to swallow. Calm and easy, like he was so sure of himself. She already disliked him.

"Take it easy," he said in as calm a tone as he could. "The name's Alain. I didn't mean to intrude."

"Well, you *are* intruding, Alain. This is private property."

"Yeah, I heard you the first time."

He shrugged off his rucksack and let it drop in the sand next to Charizard. She watched his eyes as they took in the sight of the coast, its gold-speckled shore glittering in the sinking afternoon sun. He'd never been here before, she surmised. They always marveled at the Gold Coast actually being golden.

"This is the Tower of Mastery," Korrina said. "If you're looking for lodgings, the Pokémon Center in Shalour City just across the bay usually has vacancy."

"That's what I'm here for, the Tower of Mastery."

"Why?" Korrina blurted out.

He gave her a coy look. "I was hoping you could tell me that."

What the fuck is this guy's problem?

"Look, unless you have business with the Gym Leader, then you don't have any reason to be here."

His mouth twitched. The sparkle was gone from his eyes. "Tell me what this Tower of Mastery is all about."

Korrina glared at him. "You waltz in here like you own the place and you don't even know a thing about it? Have you been living under a rock?"

"Humor me," he said softly. Dangerously. There was an edge there that hadn't been there before.

Whatever, I could kick this guy's ass with my eyes closed.

It wasn't arrogance (entirely). Korrina could ground plebs that had devoted their lives to the martial arts, the normally insurmountable Atlas, and even steel-nerved Adamantines in hand-to-hand combat.

"The Tower of Mastery is sacred ground. Show a little humility. You're standing on the spot where a wise and powerful Bellator first discovered the secret of Mega Evolution generations ago."

Alain's expression morphed from quiet disdain to bewildered interest. He took a few steps toward Korrina, and Blaziken shot out a knife-tipped hand in warning. Embers flared at the tips of its feathers. Alain stopped short, but his Charizard towered behind him, eyes narrowed and jaws bared as it stared down Blaziken, daring it to try anything.

"Mega Evolution," Alain said. "Are there people here who know the secret?"

Pangoro lumbered behind Korrina, its dark eyes alert as its thick paws sank into the soft sand. Lucario silently appeared at Korrina's side, sharp eyes watchful. She put a hand on its shoulder.

"That depends on who is asking," Gurkinn called from the porch's sliding glass door.

"I've got this, Grandpa," Korrina said.

Gurkinn frowned. "Yes, that's what I'm afraid of. Young man, please forgive Korrina. She doesn't like anyone she meets at first."

Alain caught her eye again, and a spark of anger electrified her spine. He knew her name now. It felt like an absurd defeat.

"You seem interested in Mega Evolution," Gurkinn went on. "I'm sure you can understand our...caution when we meet someone like you out of the blue."

"You make it sound like it's something that needs protecting," Alain said.

Korrina and Gurkinn remained silent, and he got the message.

"Then that's why I'm here. I saw this place, the search light at the top of the tower," Alain went on.

Korrina swallowed hard, but she forced herself not to look toward the top of the tower. That was no searchlight, but she wasn't about to tell Alain that.

"It was like it was calling to me. Look, I can't really explain it, but if you're in charge here and you know about Mega Evolution, then I'm not leaving until I get some answers."

"Do *not* speak to my Grandpa that way. We don't owe you anything," Korrina said.

Alain looked between Korrina and Gurkinn, weighing his options. She hoped that for his sake he was contemplating the fastest route out of Shalour. He rubbed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Lemme start over. It's been a rough few months, and my manners're a little rusty."

His beard was coarse and growing in scraggly, like he'd forgotten to shave for a week. There were bags under his bleary eyes, purple and mottled as though he'd recently stumbled out of a bar fight. The breeze was blowing the wrong way, but Korrina was sure she caught a stench of something sweetly foul, dank like a cheap motel room where the cigarette smoke and vomit and sweat had bonded to the walls like a second layer of paint.

"I don't really know why I'm here," Alain went on before Korrina could comment on his shabby appearance. "But I think you can help me figure that out."

He drew a serrated hunting knife from a leather sheaf strapped to his thigh and dragged the blade across his bare palm. Blood dribbled onto the pristine sands, thick and red and slow to fall, almost sticky. Before anyone could stop him, he turned to face Charizard and touched his

bloody palm to the beast's scaly chest. Blood dropped from Alain's wrist down Charizard's belly and dyed the orange scales a glossy black that spread like an oil spill. Charizard threw back its head as the black venom spread over its body, lengthening its talons and engorging its muscles. Its great wings stretched, black as pitch, and when it roared, the flames that licked its elongated teeth were as blue as the morning seascape. Sharper, leaner, undoubtedly faster—those bat-like wings could have propelled it through the night air unseen and at speeds nearly double that of a normal Charizard.

"Holy shit." Korrina gaped up at Mega Charizard—she'd never seen one turn black before.

Alain let his hand fall and turned back to face Korrina and Gurkinn over his shoulder. "How am I doing so far?"

Gurkinn walked slowly over the porch with a slight limp, his feeble hands clasped behind his back over his billowing, yellow gi. "Why don't you join us for dinner, young man?"

Korrina stacked three plates and three sets of forks and knives and brought them to the dining table. The second floor communal quarters she shared with Gurkinn consisted of a large, marble-tiled kitchen, dining room, and sitting room that was really just one large room segmented by jutting half-walls that created artificial corridors. Two wide balconies sandwiched the floor on the north and south ends, overlooking the ocean and the bay, respectively.

When she was a little girl, Korrina had affectionately dubbed the floor the 'wind tunnel' because it was precisely that. Hurricane shutters, folded back and stored for the time being, rattled with the northerly gales that swept through the narrow corridors and out over the southern balcony. Leaving a balcony door partially open created a spooky whistling, like the sound of blowing over the top of a glass bottle, and could be heard all the way on the ground floor Gym. The layout of the jutting half walls spared the kitchen, living, and dining rooms the briny breezes, leaving just the right amount of churn and flutter to air out the space. The floor was never dusty, and it was always cool even in the sweltering summer months.

Dinner was simple and casual, as it usually was. Korrina liked to work with her hands and didn't mind cooking for Gurkinn and herself, as she usually did. Tonight, however, her usually cathartic process of boiling the water, chopping the vegetables, and taste-testing the sauce

was a prickly affair. Alain had washed up for dinner and stored his rucksack in the living room in a discreet corner, but he needed a shower and a shave and probably a swift kick in the ass, though the latter was more for Korrina's benefit than his. She snickered at the thought, and Gurkinn, as though reading her mischievous thoughts, gave her that look that said 'behave'. The same one he'd given her when she was a child and reckless. The child in her was long grown up, but the woman she'd become respected Gurkinn's wisdom despite that reckless streak she'd stubbornly held onto. Whatever had piqued his interest in Alain, whatever had moved him to invite the man into their private home merited a baseline of deference and respect. To a point.

And then there was that black Mega Charizard. That could mean only one thing, and it was enough to push Korrina to seriously question her grandfather's judgment in this matter. Anyone with an inkling of Mega Evolution knew what a black Mega Charizard meant.

Korrina brought two bowls to the table, and Gurkinn began serving himself, while Alain politely waited for Korrina to take her share. Once they were all served, they began to eat. Korrina kept an eye on Alain, noting how he wolfed down his food like it might get up and walk off the plate.

"Hungry?" she said pointedly.

Alain chewed and managed to swallow the fistful of food he'd shoveled into his mouth before wiping it with a napkin.

Classy.

"That obvious, huh? It's been a long time since I had a home cooked meal this good."

It's probably been a long time since you had anything to eat that didn't come in a greasy wrapper.

"Korrina is gifted in the kitchen. I count that blessing every day, considering I hardly know how to boil water for tea," Gurkinn joked politely.

Korrina decided not to comment even as she felt Alain's gaze alight on her. The more she thought about that black Mega Charizard, the more she couldn't ignore the elephant in the room. Gurkinn had said nothing about it, but he had to know. Of course he knew, and yet he'd invited Alain into their home. She was going to get to the bottom of

this, one way or another.

"So, Alain," Gurkinn went on. "We get the curious scientist or the ambitious trainer around here every so often, but they usually come seeking the power of Mega Evolution. It's not often we see someone who has already discovered it."

"Charizard and I have been using Mega Evolution for a couple years now," Alain said vaguely.

Korrina had heard enough. "Speaking of your Charizard, I've never seen one turn black when it Mega Evolved before. What's a *Titan* doing all the way out here alone?"

Gurkinn eyed her askance, his look reproving, but he said nothing.

Alain rubbed the stubble over his mouth and chin, taking a moment to collect his thoughts. "I guess there's no point in hiding it. I never intended to try. Yeah, I'm a Titan and a vanither. I've been on my own since I was fourteen."

Korrina shivered at his casual use of that curse. *Vanither*. She had no ties to Titans or their ways, but everyone knew their reputation for duplicity. After the downfall of Lance the Dragon Master, Kanto and Johto's former Champion-turned-terrorist, public and private opinion of Titans had plummeted beyond the existing skepticism and mistrust that already poisoned their reputations. Lance had used his Titan powers to summon the sea monster Lugia with plans to wipe out all Tamers and those who opposed him. Even his clan in Blackthorn scrambled to distance themselves from him in the wake of his defeat. The worst of the Titans, the vanithers, were cast out from their clan and doomed to wander alone, ostracized, not to be trusted. Not that any Titans could be trusted.

Alain looked between Korrina and Gurkinn as though daring them to question what he'd just revealed.

"So you have chosen the life of a vander and learned the secrets of Mega Evolution along the way." Gurkinn used the politically correct term for one in Alain's shoes who had cut off all ties with other Dragon Tamers, hiding the momentary surprise he'd felt at hearing such an ugly curse at his simple dinner table. "Intriguing. And how did you and Charizard reach this level?"

Korrina watched Alain carefully, looking for the lies all Titans told. They couldn't help it, it was said. It was in their blood to control and

manipulate, to lie and betray and even to turn on their own. There had to be more to the story. No way he just up and left his clan one day out of righteous indignation or moral superiority. Titans were all the same.

To his credit, Alain retained a façade of calm composure and took a casual sip of his water. He'd declined a glass of wine Gurkinn had offered him just before they all sat down for dinner. "Someone showed me the way. Charizard and I had to do the work, but I had a guide. I don't want to sound ungrateful after you've opened your home to me, but I'd rather not talk about it if it's all right with you."

I bet you wouldn't, Korrina thought.

As though hearing her thoughts, Alain locked gazes with her and held her glare in challenge. *Try it*, he seemed to communicate. Korrina bit her tongue to keep it from licking her lips. Oh, but she would just love to try it right here, right now, one on one, her fists in his tired face until that precious Dragonsblood all Titans treasured more than silver and gold ran into his sparkling, blue eyes.

"Of course," Gurkinn said. "We all must face our demons in our own time, alone. But I would ask you, what's brought you here? Why did you leave this mentor of yours?"

The composure Alain had retained well enough chipped away and he shifted in his seat, breaking the staring contest with Korrina. "Someone I'd promised to keep safe ended up getting hurt because of me. I couldn't stay. I... I can't go back."

Gurkinn tugged on the ends of his long, limp mustachios, a habit when he was ruminating. "I see. I'm sorry to hear that."

Korrina did a good enough job containing her incredulity, having learned to swallow pain and turn it into a source of strength over the years. But inside she was boiling. This guy, Alain, if that was even his real name, was dangerous. Not just because he was a Titan, but because even his own kind had turned their backs on him. She had no idea if he was telling the truth (unlikely), and he'd given her no reason to trust him. For all she knew, he could be looking for a quick fix, or he could be a criminal on the run, or he could have maliciously hurt that person he claimed to care about, maybe irreversibly. He wouldn't be the first to show up here with nefarious motives.

"I understand Korrina spoke to you a little about this place," Gurkinn said. "What do you think about what she said?"

"Truthfully, I wasn't aware this place was the site of the first Mega Evolution. But now that I know, I can't help but feel like I was meant to be here. I know how that must sound." He put up his hands to preempt any kind of rebuke, but none came. "But I don't know how else to explain it. I was just going through the motions for so long, and all of a sudden, I found this place."

"I understand," Gurkinn reassured him in that voice he used to reassure Korrina. "This land is sacred. It calls to us, to the ones who know to listen. The fact that you're here now is not a coincidence."

Korrina could not stand it any longer. "Grandpa, please, you can't be serious. With all due respect, we don't know this guy. He wouldn't be the first traveler to come sniffing around for something he has no right to possess."

"Hey, I'm not sniffing around anything," Alain defended.

Gurkinn put his hands up. "What my granddaughter means to say is that this place has a way of tempting the darkness in people's hearts. Many come here looking for power, but few have the wisdom and patience to understand it. It consumes those who are not ready or worthy.

"You've come here searching for something," Gurkinn went on. "If it's power you seek, you'll find it here, but not as you are now. As long as you're running from the past, you will never have the courage to face it. You and Charizard may have the mechanics down, and yet you've come here lost and afraid, guilty about the past you are not able to face. It isn't simply that you do not understand, but that you will not let yourself understand."

Alain stared at Gurkinn but could not muster any words.

Korrina rolled her eyes. "Forget it, Grandpa. He said himself he doesn't even know why he's here."

"Korrina, my dear, you should know very well that not all of us who wander are lost."

"*I'm sorry, baby,"* her mother's voice, a hollow whisper she barely remembered anymore, echoed in the fog of her memory. *"I'm just so tired."*

Korrina blinked and averted her gaze, thrown by the unbidden memory and angry that it affected her more than it should have in

front of this stranger. That old, gnawing loneliness turned her fingers and toes cold, and the scar on her knee ached. Alain noticed the sudden change in her and watched her carefully.

"No, she's right, I don't know what brought me here or what I thought I'd find coming here," Alain admitted. "But you're right about me, all of it. If there's a way..." He trailed off as though the words pained him. "If there's a way to make it right, however I can, I have to find it. Please..."

He looked at Gurkinn like a starving man looks at the ones with more than they can consume, wondering why, *why*, and please just help, help in any way you can, I don't know how, just please, anything will do, anything to hold onto...

"The only one you need to ask to change your life is yourself," Gurkinn said. "Until you have the courage to do that, I'll give you permission to train here. But...I'll need the Gym Leader's approval. She is the keeper of this tower, and it is her decision."

Alain blinked, slowly understanding his meaning, and dragged his eyes back to Korrina, mouth slightly parted. It should have felt good, that shock of recognition when he looked at her now in a different light. *She* was the Gym Leader, one recognized not only by the people of Shalour City, but by Diantha, the Champion of Kalos herself, to keep her peace and uphold her justice. It should have felt good, but Korrina still heard her mother's tinny whispers in her ears, sad and selfish and still raw after so many years of convincing herself that she should have been enough of a reason for her mother to stay and that it wasn't her fault that her mother was too much of a coward to believe in that.

"Please," Alain repeated, this time to Korrina.

"*Please,"* a young Korrina sobbed as she clutched her shattered leg, the pain too demonic to fight back, and stared in horror at the monster she'd once loved.

It took everything she had just to return Alain's gaze, her green eyes reflected in his. Where were these memories coming from all of a sudden? Why did it all come back when she looked at him?

"I'll do whatever it takes," Alain said in a tone that transported Korrina, as though they were the only people in the room, on the entire island.

She'd made a similar promise to Gurkinn all those years ago, a promise to herself, to the mother that had chosen the coward's way out and left her to fend for herself against the monster in the shadows, still alive and real in her memories as he'd been in her past.

Korrina clenched her fists in her lap until they hurt. "Approval granted," she said, hardly recognizing her own voice.

Alain spared her a glimpse of a smile that could have dazzled if he'd let it. It was there, buried under the years of running, searching, the nights spent alone, the failures that clung to his shoulders and sank their claws into him, and for a moment, Korrina forgot that she did not like this man, that she didn't trust him, that whatever the magic in his blood, she would not be seduced like so many others before her by his kind. Just for a moment, just a whisper of a smile and the memories it evoked, and she was undone.

"Then it's settled," Gurkinn said. "When we finish with dinner, Korrina will show you to one of the spare bedrooms upstairs. But I warn you. This will not be easy. Do not forget what I said."

The moment was gone, and Alain nodded at Gurkinn. "I won't. Thank you. Both of you."

He turned back to Korrina, but she regained herself and frowned at him, the natural resentment for him swelling her veins, strangely invigorating. She pushed out of her chair and stood.

"I'm finished. If you don't want to get lost, I suggest you follow me."

Alain wiped his mouth with a napkin, his dinner long finished, and hastily got up after her.

"Grandpa, please excuse me. I'll be back to clean up in a bit."

Gurkinn took her hand gently in his weathered one. "It's all right. I'll take care of it."

He held her gaze. There was gratitude there, as well as a silent understanding of what tormented her. Fine. If this was what he thought was right, she would not oppose him. Not after everything he'd done for her.

Alain grabbed his rucksack from the living room and held up his hand to the strong breeze blowing through the wind tunnel. Korrina pulled away from Gurkinn and gestured for Alain to follow her to the stairs,

not bothering to call out to him.

She headed up the stairs to the third floor living quarters, her footsteps echoing on the marble steps, and Alain's soon joined hers in a percussive parade upwards. The sounds of the wind tunnel died down as they rounded the turn in the stairs and emerged on the third floor hallway. She passed her own door and the two just past it, finally stopping at the room farthest away from hers at the end of the corridor.

"This is your room. We have housekeepers, but they're not here to clean up after you. You're a guest here, so don't forget it," she said as she opened the door and led him inside.

The room was not much different from her own, sparsely furnished and lacking in ornaments or decorations. The layout was the inverse of hers, with the queen-sized bed on the right side of the room and the connecting bathroom on the left. A balcony overlooked the beach, and Korrina knew that if she went outside, she would easily see her own balcony to the left.

Alain set his rucksack down on the bed, and Korrina turned just in time to see three Pokéballs clipped to his belt when his jacket rode up. She wondered what Pokémon he had with him besides Charizard and made a mental note to find out sooner rather than later to be prepared. Just in case. Gurkinn may trust Alain enough to invite him to stay at the Tower of Mastery and train, but that didn't mean Korrina had to.

"I won't forget," Alain said.

He wasn't looking at her, distracted as he opened up his rucksack and rummaged around for something. Korrina narrowed her eyes, irritated at his blasé attitude. He really did not know where he was and who he was dealing with.

Faster than he could possibly hope to follow, Korrina closed the distance to Alain, grabbed him roughly by the throat, and shoved him bodily against the nearest wall. Alain's sparkling eyes widened in surprise as he found it much harder to breathe all of a sudden. His hands went to Korrina's wrist on instinct, but her grip was sure and ironclad, and her body was positioned sideways, her free hand showing the heel of her palm and ready to strike if he tried anything. He tried to remain calm and limp in her hold, but she was squeezing like she meant business.

"I'd say take me to dinner before we jump to the foreplay, but I guess we already did that," he rasped.

Korrina glared green fury at him and squeezed harder. "Shut up," she hissed. "You may be able to convince my grandpa that you're no threat, but I don't buy your bullshit for a second. I know all about you Titans."

His grip was cool on her bare wrist, but he tried his best not to struggle. "Oh, yeah? What do you think you know?"

She narrowed her eyes and leaned in to intimidate him. "I know you lie. So I'm only gonna tell you this once, *vanither*." To his credit, he didn't flinch at the curse. "If I sense anything out of line about you, anything at all to suggest you're not sincere about why you're really here, I'll break every bone in your body and spill every last drop of that precious Dragonsblood you're so proud of. Am I clear?"

Alain's thoughts raced in the span of a couple seconds. "I'd be suicidal to say no to a Bellatrix who's got me by the throat," he managed.

Good, she thought. Let him wallow in his newfound knowledge of what she was, what she could do. Titan or not, he was as vulnerable to her nimble fingers as the next person who crossed her.

After another couple of seconds watching him struggle to breathe and to let her message sink in, Korrina released him roughly and he slumped against the wall. She swallowed the bitter disgust in her throat at the sight of him. He wouldn't reveal what he'd been up to until he wandered here to Shalour, but it was obvious to anyone with eyes that he'd let himself go. Pathetic. Well, they would all find out very soon if he was blowing smoke or if he actually had a mind to make a change. She would flush it out of him the best way she knew how.

When Korrina made it to the door and was about to let herself out, his voice stopped her, strained from her earlier assault.

"You're not wrong about Titans," he said.

Korrina spared him a scathing glance over her shoulder.

"But you're wrong about me. I left because I didn't want to be like them."

He held her gaze, entreating and steady, and for a moment of insanity,

she almost believed him. "We'll see."

Korrina shut the door behind her.

The next morning, Alain emerged from his room and headed back to the second floor to find some breakfast. He'd showered thoroughly, a little embarrassed by his shabby appearance and the sweaty-sweet stench that had coated him after the long flight here. The bathroom was stocked with all the necessary amenities, including a razor. Shaving took a while with the triple-bladed handheld after years of relying on an electric shaver, and he cut himself so many times he nearly threw the thing in the toilet. But eventually, clean and somewhat presentable once he'd removed all the little wads of toilet paper he'd stuck to the tiny cuts on his face, he was ready to start the day.

It was early, but he hadn't been able to sleep, wishing he'd gone ahead and bought that extra bottle of Jack like he'd dreamed about back on Route Eleven. But Korrina was practically salivating for an excuse to dislike him even more and possibly throw him out, and while Gurkinn was friendly enough, Alain wasn't about give either of them a reason to question his motives. He'd just have to deal with the shaking in his hands, the sweating at night, the insomnia until it passed naturally.

Yeah, good fucking luck, dude.

Alain had no idea what Gurkinn had in store for him, so he'd dressed casually in green cargo pants and a black T-shirt. He'd have to ask about where he could do a load of laundry, as well as where he could let his Pokémon run around. Tyrantrum was not going to like being confined to the island, and Shalour City itself was not exactly the Dragon dino's typical running grounds.

"Good morning," a portly woman in a grey uniform and white apron greeted Alain in the kitchen. "Can I help you with something?"

Alain faltered and scratched at his still-damp hair. "Oh, um, good morning. Sorry, I was looking for Gurkinn. I thought he might be here having breakfast...?"

The matron smiled. "No, I'm afraid Master Gurkinn takes his breakfast," she paused to check her wristwatch, "at ten thirty, so not for another couple hours or so."

That sounded oddly late for an old man, and Alain voiced as much.

"Not at all. He rises at dawn for tea, then meditates until breakfast if he isn't training with Lady Korrina. They usually dine together afterwards. Would you like me to show you where they're training now?"

The hunger wasn't bad—he would've preferred a drink, anyway. Maybe some spectating would take his mind off the itch, he decided. Korrina was a Bellatrix, after all. There was no one better to watch in a fight.

"Sure, that'd be great. Thanks."

The woman smiled. "This way."

Alain followed her downstairs to the main floor, the Shalour City Gym, which was nothing more than a huge training arena. The center, which opened directly onto the sandy ground and was peppered with boulders of various sizes, stretched about seventy feet on all sides. It was surrounded by glass-walled training rooms for people, complete with mats and weights and various exercise equipment. There were people sparring in one of the rooms, and still others working out their muscles with dumbbells or yoga or cardio training. But Alain paid them no mind, his gaze drawn ineluctably to the sandy center arena were Korrina and her Blaziken were running through a drill with a pair of fearsome Sawk and Throh while Gurkinn looked on. From the looks of it, Korrina and Blaziken were tag teaming Sawk and Throh.

"Best view is over there," the maid whispered to Alain when she saw him staring.

He followed her pointed finger to the small stack of bleachers on the left-hand side of the arena, where a few people taking a break from their workout were spectating. "Thanks, sorry to drag you from work."

The maid left him to it, and Alain made his way around the arena toward the bleachers. He found a seat in the second row separate from the other onlookers, who ignored him completely in favor of watching Korrina and her Blaziken. Alain soon became absorbed in the scene himself, a little star struck. He'd never seen a Bellatrix in action this close before.

Korrina and her Blaziken moved in sync, and he didn't hear her give it orders at all. The short, heavyset Throh moved faster than its body betrayed, lunging at Blaziken with a nasty Dynamicpunch. But Korrina dove in out of nowhere and rammed the burly, red Fighter in the side like she wasn't tackling a three-hundred-pound mass of raw muscle

and instinct. Throh grunted and missed its attack, falling under Korrina's well-aimed tackle, but Sawk was right there and ready with a Vital Throw.

The tall, blue Fighter snatched up Korrina by the arms, swung her around at a harsh angle, and hurled her into the air toward the nearest boulder. Alain bit his tongue by accident as his body jerked. This was supposed to be a spar, not a fight to the death!

Blaziken, however, was even faster than Korrina had been and lunged into the air on its powerful hind legs like some kind of super-powered pogo stick. Its talon-tipped hands wrapped around Korrina's waist, pulled her close, and then it spun in midair to land sideways against the boulder that would have crushed Korrina. There was a split second of tension as Blaziken's knees bent, coiled, and then it spring boarded back at Sawk with Korrina in its arms. She was already wrapping her arm around its feathered headdress and positioning herself for a follow-up.

"Go!" she barked.

Blaziken brought its right leg around, trailing embers, just as Korrina leaped from its back. Sawk prepared to defend, too slow to attempt a dodge, and glowed red with Endure just as Blaziken slammed into its chest with a fiery *whoosh*. Meanwhile, Korrina flipped in midair just as she was about to fall and extended her leg. Throh was ready and had begun pumping up its muscles with the beginnings of Superpower, bulging as though injected with a severe overdose of steroids.

"Sky Uppercut!" Korrina shouted as gravity plummeted her to the ground.

Blaziken rebounded off the dazed Sawk, hardly slowing down at all, and lunged at Throh fists first. The engorged Fighter never saw it coming in time. Blaziken rammed Throh with a glowing fist in the back, stalling its Superpower, just as Korrina's leg crash landed over Throh's left shoulder in a move that would have shattered every bone from neck to pelvis on a regular person.

Alain covered his mouth before he could do something ridiculous like gasp or cry out. He was tempted, but his fellow spectators continued to whisper amongst themselves, hardly cheering at all. That made him wonder just how often they got the chance to watch a five-six blonde Barbie doll beat the daylights out of Pokémon that could crush stone with their bare hands.

Korrina and Blaziken regrouped, while Gurkinn recalled Sawk and Throh and motioned to an attendant standing by. He handed the young man the two Pokéballs, perhaps to be taken to the Pokémon Center for medical attention, then turned back to Korrina and her Blaziken. The Fighter parrot towered over Korrina, proud and pompous, but its blue eyes were alert and searching, its talon-fists clacking as it cracked its knuckles.

"You and Blaziken are improving your coordination," Gurkinn appraised. "You've made decent progress."

Korrina wiped the sweat from her brow. Her pink tank top was darkened at the neck with moisture, and Alain wondered just how long she'd been at it this morning. "I still got hit."

Gurkinn didn't even try to make her feel better. "Yes, you did. Imagine if this had been a Mega Evolution battle. That hit could have crippled Blaziken and it would not have saved you in time."

Korrina's eyes flashed with a wave of anger, but Grukinn nipped it in the bud before she could get a word in edgewise.

"You must be more vigilant, Korrina. Control your temper, or it will be your and your Pokémon's undoing."

Blaziken looked down at Korrina and cocked its beaked head, red and gold feathers ruffling. Korrina balled her fists and breathed deeply, willing the momentary flush to subside.

"Yes, Grandpa. You're right."

She palmed her right fist and bowed respectfully. Gurkinn acknowledged her efforts with a nod, then turned to the stands.

"And you," he called to the few people that had been watching the match. "Please take note of your Gym Leader's example. If you want to fight like a Bellator, you must learn to move with your Pokémon, feel as they feel, just as Korrina does. Please use the arena to practice now."

The gathered people, Gym trainers from the looks of it, scrambled to their feet and jogged toward the sandy arena. They released their Pokémon, everything from tiny Machop to hulking Hariyama, and took up positions to practice.

Gurkinn's eyes alighted on Alain in the corner, and he stood up to

meet the old man down in the sand. Korrina was busy ruffling Blaziken's feathers and whispering to it, and the lanky Pokémon clucked its satisfaction as it leaned into her touch. She had a soft smile on her lips as she spoke to Blaziken.

"Alain, good morning," Gurkinn greeted. He had his hands behind his back and wore black and white today, like a temple monk straight out of the Celestic Shrine in Sinnoh.

"Good morning, sir," Alain said politely.

Korrina heard them speaking and turned on Alain, all traces of that soft smile gone. "Nice of you to join us sometime today."

"It's all right," Gurkinn said. "You didn't know. Korrina and I usually start the Gym workouts at seven in the morning. We do value punctuality, so perhaps now that you're aware of our schedule, we can start with everyone else, yes?"

Yikes.

No wonder Korrina watched her tongue around this old man. Alain could practically feel the threat underneath the friendly warning in Gurkinn's tone. This was not a man you crossed lightly, and respect was earned, not expected. That was fine. Alain could swallow his pride when the stakes were this high and the payout almost palpable under his fingertips.

"Yes, of course. I'll be ready to begin tomorrow."

Korrina smirked. "Tomorrow? What's wrong with today?"

Blaziken eyed Alain like it was calculating the most tender part of him to tear its wicked beak into first, and despite himself he swallowed a lump of fear in his throat. That thing looked a lot bigger and meaner without Charizard here to back him up.

"Yes, quite right. I believe Training Room Eight is reserved for us today," Gurkinn said.

"I'll lead the way." Korrina recalled Blaziken and headed for the glass-walled training rooms on the far side of the Gym.

With no choice, Alain trudged after her through the sand while Gurkinn followed at a more leisurely pace as he watched the Gym trainers practice.

Stay cool, dude. Just stay cool.

He stuffed his hands in his pockets to keep them from jittering and tried to ignore the tickle in his throat that reminded him of how thirsty he was. Korrina led him to one of the empty training rooms, and the door swung closed behind them on its own. Immediately, all sound from the main arena died down as the two of them were plunged into eerie silence. The walls were soundproofed, he realized. There was a sound system with a couple speakers spread out in the corners of the ceiling, but no music played at the moment. The floor was completely covered in training mats, and Alain followed Korrina's lead by kicking off his shoes and storing them in a small rack against the wall by the door. It smelled stale in here, old sweat, a little coppery, a little bleached, and the ever-present sour taste of salt in the air from the ocean depressed it all like a blanket.

"If you're late again tomorrow, you'll be running laps around the island the rest of the day with the other late risers, standard procedure," Korrina said as she stretched her muscles. "Even if you forfeit time to train with others, there's always time to train yourself. Consider it a friendly warning."

Yeah, right.

"I won't be late again."

He watched as she stretched her legs, knees bent as she counted in her head. Her long ponytail skimmed her lower back, a sliver of which was exposed when she moved and her tank top rode up an inch over her grey workout capris. Even to his untrained eye, it was obvious to Alain that Korrina was in peak physical condition—rippling muscle bulging in all the right places, skin smooth and taut where only the leanest layers of body fat filled her out and made her distinctly feminine. He wondered what it took to get so fit. Even at his best when he was running around the globe for Lysandre, he was sure he wasn't anywhere near her level. And now, well, he had a long way to go.

Without thinking, he tapped his belly under his T-shirt, fingers poking at the flabby skin where once he'd been flat and toned and able to keep up with his Pokémon's exuberance. And now he was thirsting for a drink when he should have been just a little envious of Korrina's physical accomplishment.

"This space is a little small for most of my Pokémon," Alain

commented.

"That's because this room isn't meant for Pokémon's use," Korrina explained, not bothering to look at him as she continued to stretch.

"Then what're we doing in here?"

She straightened and fixed him with a pointed stare. "What do you think?"

She crossed the room to the sound system and punched a few buttons. A jarring, angry tune filtered through the speakers, not exactly loud but not easily tuned out in the small space. The beat was fast, the lyrics faster, and Korrina was light on her feet as she pulled open the small fridge next to the sound system and pulled out a bottle of water. She gulped down a third of it and returned it to the fridge, then she turned back to Alain.

"Lesson Number One," she said. "Stay on your feet."

"What—"

He barely got the word out when Korrina flew at him—yeah, flew like a goddamned raptor with its talons outstretched for the kill—and wound up a mean uppercut. Alain reacted on instinct and threw up his arms just in time to catch her punch on his forearms, but the force of her attack was unreal. Pain erupted in his left forearm and he stumbled, barely catching himself. She didn't let up for a second, and before he knew what had hit him, Korrina slashed around with her foot, stole his legs from under him, and sent him crashing to the floor in a sad heap on his back.

The air left Alain's lungs when he landed on the floor, and he sucked in a ragged breath, trying to calm his electrified synapses firing off red alerts in his brain that this chick was going to *kill him* and he was on his ass like a loser after what, three seconds in the ring with her? It was a small blessing that he was in too much shock to feel embarrassed.

Korrina towered over him and kneeled down next to him. She folded her arms over her bent knees and peered down at his face, hovering just a foot above him. This close, he could make out a small scar on her upper lip in the right corner.

"I said, stay on your feet," she said softly.

A flash of anger clouded his vision and he glared up at her. "Like hell," he spat.

She'd done it on purpose, and worse, there was nothing he could've done about it. They both knew it.

To Alain's surprise, she reached down and brushed his bangs out of his face. Her hand was cool on his flushed forehead, but she withdrew before he could really process it.

"First rule of Mega Evolution training? Your Pokémon's only as good as you are. If your Pokémon goes down, you go down with it. But the opposite's also true." She gave him a once over that would have felt strangely lascivious coming from anyone else at any other time. "I'm guessing you forgot about that part."

The door opened then, and Gurkinn found them like that, Alain sprawled on the floor clutching his throbbing left arm and Korrina hunched over him.

"I see Korrina is eager to get started," he said, noting the music and glancing at the speakers.

Alain sat up and Korrina leaned back but didn't give him his space. What was it with this girl? Did she really despise Titans so much? He supposed he couldn't blame her there, given his own low opinion of his blood relations. But she didn't even know him.

Yeah, like that's ever stopped anyone before.

Swallowing his earlier frustration and clutching his throbbing arm to his chest, Alain looked up at Gurkinn. "Look, I don't wanna sound ungrateful to either of you, but I'm honestly not much of a fighter, not like you or your Gym trainers. I'm willing to learn, but I'm having a hard time seeing how beating the crap outta me is going to get me there."

Korrina pushed him back on his back with a strong hand to his chest. "Did you even listen to a word I just said?"

Gurkinn said nothing, and Korrina got up with a roll of her eyes. Alain pushed up on his elbows again and slowly got to his feet.

"The best way to learn is to experience," Gurkinn said. "Korrina is a Master Bellatrix who has personally trained both Tamers and plebs in the martial arts. You are in good hands."

If I can live through it.

He kept that thought to himself and watched as Korrina circled him. She wasn't looking at him, but at his feet.

"Widen your stance," she said mechanically. "I knocked you over so easy because you were too rigid. You have to be limber to stay on your feet."

Alain blinked and looked down at his feet. They looked fine to him, but deciding not to argue, he did as he was told and spread his stance. It felt awkward, his feet at shoulder width, and he tried bending his knees a little to balance out the strange sensation.

A blur of blonde was his only warning when Korrina lunged at him again. Swearing, Alain threw up his hands again, catching her jab by pure luck. There was power behind that attack, a kind of elemental strength he'd never felt before in another person, and it rocked him where he stood. But his left leg supported his weight and he maintained his balance.

Korrina flipped her ponytail and fixed him with a cold stare. She nodded as an afterthought. "Better."

"How about a little warning next time?"

Korrina ducked swept out with her leg all of a sudden, buckling his knees and sending him falling again. One moment he was feeling marginally less pathetic, and the next he was flat on his back again, head spinning. Korrina looked down at him over her nose.

"Look for the warnings yourself. You have eyes, Titan. Use them."

Gurkinn watched, the silent spectator, and offered no words of encouragement or protest. If he'd known this was what training at the Tower of Mastery was like, perhaps Alain would not have bothered coming out here. But here he was, and he'd promised both of them last night that he would do whatever it took.

When has a promise made any difference? A cruel voice taunted him from the dark part of his heart that was still screaming in vain for a drink.

And just like that, the anger was back and cleared his head. No way was he going to let this girl, Bellatrix or not, kick him around like an old chew toy without doing anything about it.

"*Your Pokémon's only as good as you are.*"

Okay, he could listen. He had to get in shape if he wanted to keep up with Mega Charizard. Okay.

Okay.

This was going to hurt.

He got up again, knees a bit wobbly from where Korrina had knocked them out from under him, but he managed. He took a moment to check his stance—that had helped last time. She'd been right about him standing too rigidly.

Korrina watched him, expression impassive if not a little sour, but she was all business. "Keep your elbows in close to your sides. Yeah, like that. Shoulders loose. The minute you tense up, that's when you'll be too slow to move."

Listen, he willed himself through the knee-jerk reaction to snap at her.

He loosened his shoulders and tightened up his elbows. It felt weird, like something was pushing down on his shoulders and making him heavy. Unnatural. He tried to scrutinize Korrina's pose, but she looked so fluid and natural that there was no point in comparing. She circled.

"No, don't ball your fists," she said not unkindly. "Keep them loose. If someone comes at you with a knife, you'll be too slow to grab it."

"Who would come at me with a knife?"

In lieu of answering, she lunged. Alain had kept an eye on her deadly fists and saw her coming, and he attempted a dodge. Her fist aimed at the empty air where his head had been, and he almost smiled, but then her other hand hit the side of his neck hard and messed with his breathing. Before he realized she'd feinted, Korrina brought her knee up and rammed him in the stomach. Choking and gasping for air, Alain reacted on instinct. He wrapped his hands around her leg and pulled with everything he had.

In the split second before they went down, he locked gazes with Korrina just inches away. Tempestuous jade constantly simmering with barely concealed disdain brightened with surprise and a rush of adrenaline, almost sparkling, and threw him for a loop. His weight pushed them both down, but the almost-victory was short lived when Korrina used his grip on her leg to thrust herself over and on top of

him, swinging her free leg around to lock him in a chokehold between her thighs.

This time, Alain hit the mat on his stomach, his chin smacking the floor with a skull-shattering thud that made him see stars. Korrina rolled with him until he was on his back—again—and she had him pinned with her legs, his arms flapping haplessly. When his vision began to clear, he found her looking down at him upside-down, her long ponytail tickling his right temple.

"Someone who isn't as good with their arms and legs as me," she answered his earlier question.

He was tempted to make a crude joke about the fact that she had him quite literally between her legs, but decided against it with Gurkinn in the room. Plus, you know, she could have snapped his neck with those ultra-toned thighs faster than you could say 'Kegel'.

Shut the fuck up*, brain.*

Korrina released him and got up again, went to the fridge, and took another swig of her water. Alain did his best to swallow a groan and sit up, one hand on his head as the ache slowly subsided.

"Catch."

Korrina tossed Alain a fresh water bottle from the mini fridge, and he caught it, saving what little was left of his dignity. The water was cold and felt good on his raw throat, easing the hot thickness in his tongue over having gone this long without a proper drink. It wasn't his old pal Jack, but it would have to do for now.

"I'm sure you know already that only Tamers can help their Pokémon achieve Mega Evolution," Gurkinn said, breaking his silence. "They lend the chosen Pokémon their aura, and it awakens a power that has long been lost to the Pokémon, dormant in their blood."

Alain swallowed the water but remained seated on the mat. He looked up at Gurkinn and blinked. "Yeah, I know. That's why Charizard regains his Dragonsblood when we Mega Evolve. Only a Titan can do that."

Gurkinn nodded. "What I want you to think about now is the truth behind the science and mechanics of the process. What does it mean to join two souls? Mega Evolution is not a one-way street, as you can see from the fact you feel what your Charizard feels. Charizard fights

for you, so you in turn must make sure that you can fight for it, that you can support it."

"Of course I support Charizard. We've been together for more than half my life."

"Is this not listening thing something all you Titans do?" Korrina interrupted. "Or is this you trying not to be like them?"

The way she threw his words from the previous night back at him, words he'd whispered in confidence in a sincere effort to make her see the good in him, made his blood boil.

"'Cause I gotta say," Korrina went on. "You're *really* doing spectacularly."

"Think about what I said, Alain," Gurkinn said. "There is no room for ego in Mega Evolution."

Alain got up and set down his half-empty water bottle at the edge of the mat near the wall. His T-shirt was starting to stick to his collar. Even the small exertion this morning was wearing on his out-of-shape body, he realized with no small degree of shame. How had he let things get this bad?

"Okay, but—"

"My grandpa said think, not talk," Korrina interrupted. "Fix your stance. We have another forty-five minutes before breakfast."

Fuck me.

She ran at him again, and Alain prayed he'd be able to walk out of here on his own two legs to enjoy that breakfast.

Deep in the mountains west of Snowbelle City, the snowstorm had not deterred one soul from his tireless work. His *life's* work, to be precise. He wouldn't be here otherwise in this frozen shithole, his ass freezing even under layers of Sawsbuck skin slacks and the heat on at full blast. He was convinced no one was ever warm in this godforsaken purgatory.

"Snowbelle, more like Snow-hell."

A round, red furred Darumaka grunted from its perch on his desk, its

little mouth stretched in a perpetual grin and its small hands clasped around its smaller feet. He liked to think it found him funny. There was no one else here to laugh at his lame jokes or commiserate. No one else in their right mind would be in this frozen desert, case in point.

Unless they had access to a secret, subterranean lab wholly financed by Team Flare but with Lysandre none the wiser. Unless they had all the time in the world to find the answer to a problem that had plagued humanity since it surfaced generations ago. Unless they were as smart as him, and let's face it—no one was as fucking smart as him. They could have everything else on him, but they would never have that.

Laevus the scientist got up out of his chair and yawned, stretching his stubby arms over his head. His Mareep wool sweater was warmer than it looked, thin as it was, but his pale flesh was sensitive to extremes. The extra girth around his middle, padding his buttocks and thighs and arms, did little to insulate him. Thirty-five years old and victim to a creeping hairline that thinned his naturally brown hair, the self-made scientist had a good gig going here, if he ignored the fact that he was in the middle of fucking nowhere. Still, people were distractions. No one would look for him out here, especially not Lysandre. It all evened out in the end.

Holding out a meaty hand for Darumaka, Laevus palmed the round little Pokémon and helped it onto his shoulder over his lab coat. The little ball of fur was slightly smaller than a bowling ball and it radiated heat, a mobile furnace that Laevus was all too happy to keep close by. The little Pokémon was also his only companion out here in the desolate winter wasteland. They had been together since Laevus was a child, when his younger sister had caught Darumaka and gifted it to him for his fifteenth birthday. Twenty years, he mused, and Darumaka was always at his side.

"Time to check on the stones, Maru," Laevus used the nickname he'd bestowed upon Darumaka all those years ago.

The red Pokémon grunted like a piglet and kneaded his shoulder, just as eager as he was. Laevus twisted his flabby, pink lips in a grin and headed out of his office toward the lab proper. It was a stone structure, the entire lab, cut directly into the mountainside and furnished with its own generators for light and heating. Unlike his office, the main lab was not swathed in Beartic skins for insulation, and despite the roaring heaters, the space retained an insidious chill.

How he *hated* the cold, always had. It was the only thing he'd inherited from his parents, and it was too little too late in their eyes. A repugnant skuff, one born to Tamer parents but who had never manifested the Tamer abilities himself, Laevus registered the freezing temperatures more with emotional acuity than any sense of physical discomfort. If his parents could see him now, what he'd accomplished, what he was *about* to embark on, they would have been proud, he was sure of it. Even them, those supercilious blue bloods, would have cowered at the fruits of his awesome mind, his only consolation from their coupling. His sister got the rest, the name and the blood and the skills and their parents' love, all of it. But Laevus felt his time was near. He was smart like that, always had been.

"Let's see then," he cooed as he approached the glass case where he kept the specimens—seven in total. It was all he'd been able to pilfer without attracting attention.

Seven stones, crystalline and shimmering with the light of a thousand rainbows even in the dark, dingy cold underground, like they would shine no matter how deeply they were buried. Seven stones he'd pried off that monolith Lysandre had brought back with him from Hoenn and the clash of colossi once relegated to myth, now lying in wait for another calling. They were worth holing up in this frigid prison all alone. They had to be.

"Only Tamers can activate Mega Evolution," Laevus mused aloud.

Darumaka grunted and shifted on his shoulder as he leaned over the glass case and admired the stones.

"But not for long."

The answer was here, he just had to find it. These stones, the ones the mythical Pokémon of Hoenn, the masters of sea, earth, and sky had fought over, had to hold the answer. Even a skuff like Laevus could feel the power they emanated, and he had a mind to harness it. Mega Stones, Lysandre had called them when his people had successfully retrieved the giant crystal and he had assigned Laevus as head of the project to harness their power. This was where the secrets of Mega Evolution started, with these ancient rocks. So how had the Tamers figured out another way? How could it be that ordinary people could induce evolution at exponential rates with a few drops of blood? And more importantly, how could he take that power for himself? The answer was staring him in the face as he gazed at these ancient tools, he was sure of it. But how?

"Knock, knock."

Darumaka squealed and hopped off Laevus's shoulder and landed with a soft *thud* on the floor. It rolled, arms and legs tucked into its fleshy body, toward the new presence that had appeared at the door to the lab.

"You're late," Laevus said. "I've been waiting for four days. What the hell was the hold up, Malva?"

Malva bent down to pet Darumaka, who was overjoyed to see her. The fur ball had always loved Malva, drawn to her natural heat that Laevus had never possessed. She was slim where Laevus was fat, smooth and libidinous where Laevus was gruff and impatient. She had a way about her, a seductive sway that even worked on shrewd bastards like Lysandre when she really tried. Laevus had always had to prove himself to get what he wanted, then prove he could do better. Malva was the golden child, the favorite, and Laevus was the brother only she had ever had eyes for.

Malva picked up Darumaka and cradled it in her arms. She wore a white parka to blend in with the snowy environment above ground, but her dyed magenta hair stood out against it, loud and obnoxious. Laevus wondered what the hell was even the point, but decided not to ask. Malva had her ways, and he honestly could not give less of a shit as long as she delivered. She always delivered.

Red eyes found hers, the same shade of crimson as hers but possessing none of her firepower, no pun intended. "You know me, big brother," she said in that tone like melted chocolate and nitro glycerin. "I'm always fashionably late."

Malva had grown up with everything Laevus had always wanted: the love of their parents, the adoration of her teachers and mentors, and the ability so whimsically denied to him by whatever powers had decided their fates. She was Ignifera, a Fire Tamer just like their parents, and perhaps the best Kalos had ever seen. Her powers were so advanced that she could even siphon heat from open flames to heal mortal wounds. He'd seen her do it before. There was currently only one other Ignifer in the world known to possess such a power, and he was far away in the distant Unova region, no threat to Malva's supremacy here in Kalos.

"Did you bring it?" he asked, impatient as ever to move forward with his delicate research. He was doing something *important* here, you

know. One day they would write about him, about his research and whatever discoveries he was on the brink of making. He would be famous, *infamous* even, and Malva would be humbled to be the baby sister of Laevus, the great man of science who had dissected the secrets of Mega Evolution and generously shared them with the world —for a handsome price.

"Of course. I said I would."

Malva stepped aside and revealed the body of a slumped figure, bound and gagged, on the floor behind her. He was just a kid, a teenager maybe sixteen or seventeen, and he was passed out where he sat. His face was smudged with soot and his hair, a rusty brown, was burned and charred in places. His clothes were barely warm enough for the harsh weather out here, and it showed. The tip of his nose was blue with the beginnings of frostbite, and his light jacket and jeans were ripped and burned in places. He was damp where the snow he'd accumulated on the journey here had melted once inside.

"Is he even alive?" Laevus snapped.

Malva removed her red tinted sunglasses and folded them in a breast pocket of her parka, which was unzipped down the middle. "I kept him warm, don't worry so much."

Darumaka pawed at her chest, and Malva scratched the yellow tuft of hair on its head to appease it.

"Hmph. Bring him here. I'll need to have him back to full health before I begin the trial tests."

Malva pursed her lips. "How long is this going to take?"

She let go of Darumaka and reached for a Pokéball at her belt. In a flash of bright light, a Delphox about Malva's height materialized. Its bushy, gold and crimson fur bristled in the slight chill, and it twirled the long stick it always toted around in between dexterous fingers. Sharp, dark eyes alighted on Malva, but it remained silent.

"Put him on the table," Malva commanded.

Delphox eyed the slumped teenager and swished its bushy tail. Its fur needled with sapphire light that migrated toward the unconscious teen and engulfed him in a similar blue aura. Delphox's telekinetic powers lifted him off the floor like magic and floated him through the air toward a stainless steel gurney in the center of the lab, laying him

flat on his back still bound and gagged.

Laevus averted his gaze as Delphox worked, repressing a shiver. He remembered when Delphox was a tiny Fennekin. Now it was a monster that could immolate its enemies with a passing thought if it so desired—if *Malva* so desired. All she had to do was utter the words, and he'd be nothing but a charbroiled husk in a matter of seconds. Laevus wrung his hands where she could not see, trying to get the sudden tidal wave of malicious fear and jealousy under control. After years of practice, it was a rather simple feat.

"He's a thrall, just like you wanted," Malva went on, walking around the gurney and inspecting her prize like a lioness eyes a fresh kill.

Laevus frowned at her use of that filthy word. *Thrall*, the derogatory word for a pleb, for one born without the powers of a Tamer to non-Tamer parents. Someone with no chance of inheriting the ability. Normal. Not quite like Laevus, whose parents had both been Ignifer. His sensitivity to heat and cold was a constant reminder of that, though he'd reaped none of the benefits. Just looking at this nameless teenager boiled his blood. How was it that someone with zero chance of having the ability could be held in such higher regard in society than someone who had been denied it outright? Oh, he would change all that, mark his words. Soon, the distinctions would not matter. Perhaps he could thank his parents for that much. He was doing this for them, after all, to show them what they'd squandered.

"Good," Laevus said, revealing nothing of his inner thoughts.

Malva eyed him carefully in that sidelong way she had that she knew he hated. He hated how she watched him like he watched his little science projects. What had she done, anyway? *He* was the one who'd told Lysandre about her, said she had potential, said she could go all the way. She was Ignifera, you know, she had the ability. She could go places. Oh boy, did she go places. Laevus didn't know the whole story, didn't know the details, but with a face and body like his sister's and the powers of a god, he had no doubt that she'd whored and lied and cheated her way to the top. That was how women got ahead in anything, he reasoned. The prettier they were, the wider they could spread their legs and get away with it. They knew only one thing. Malva was his sister and she'd defended him as a kid, okay, he'd look the other way for that. She was all he had left, anyway, so if he turned her away then where would he be?

Malva gave little away as she studied her older brother. "How long

until it works?"

How long, not *if*. Yeah, she was his baby sister, all right, and no matter what she did, what she became, he would hold on to her until the end. That was what good big brothers did, and fuck everybody else.

"That depends on one crucial detail I didn't have the last time you were here," Laevus admitted.

Malva laid her hands flat on the gurney and peered at Laevus over her straight nose, eyes narrowed. "Oh? And what detail is *that*?"

Once, Malva had been angry with him. Downright furious. He'd sabotaged her in Lysandre's eyes by exposing some renegade missions she'd taken for personal reasons with Team Flare funds, having gotten approval from one of Lysandre's right hand men. The man, another scientist in Lysandre's employ, had been Laevus's rival in Lysandre's labs, so really, it was nothing personal, Sis. Unfortunately, Malva reacted emotionally.

The rival scientist had disappeared under mysterious circumstances thereafter and Malva was demoted to ranger duty for three months while Laevus was promoted. She'd paid him a visit after her suspension was up, even brought a nice bottle of wine to celebrate—she hadn't known it was Laevus who'd exposed her. It wasn't until halfway through dinner that Laevus found out she did know, had known the whole time. Her Pyroar was happy to share her feelings with him on the matter. He still had the third degree burn scars on his ass, ironically losing all nerve feeling in the area and thus exposing him to odd bouts of numbness and cold in extreme conditions, such as here west of Snowbelle. Every time he sat down he remembered her wrath. Crazy bitch had planned it that way.

But the past was in the past, sort of. In any case, blood was thicker than water or chocolate or whatever the fuck that saying is, he couldn't be bothered to remember now. He needed Malva, and she sure as hell needed him, he told himself. Lysandre had long run his course. Laevus was the future, Laevus was the new hope. He was her big brother, and despite their past differences, they were in this together.

Laevus scratched his flat, bulbous nose and sniffled in that repulsive way men sitting alone on trains tend to do, loud and wet and always right next to you. "I need a control, call it a perfect reversal, if you like. There're only two ways this could work, no in betweens. I need to

test both."

Malva licked her lips, and he had to fight the urge to cross his legs. "Meaning?"

"I need a counter to that." He indicated the passed out teen.

"A Tamer," Malva divined his meaning.

"Not just any Tamer. I need someone who used to be a pleb and was made a Tamer. Someone with a body that could stand the stress of having the ability forced upon them. Then I'll be able to test whether it's the power or the husk that matters."

"A made to order Tamer."

"I realize they're hard to come by," Laevus said carefully, not wanting to anger his fiery sister.

Malva shook her head. "Mediums are out of the question. There's only one born in a generation. Too much attention if one disappears."

"What about a Reaper?"

Malva's eyes flickered. "Possibly. They're hard to track down, though. Too afraid of their own kind to advertise themselves. You know how they like to cannibalize each other's powers to extend their own lives."

Demented, all of them, Laevus thought. Reaper or Medium or Ignifer, the distinctions mattered little. They were all abominations in his mind.

"Well, who else? Those're the only ones that are made instead of born, right? I *need* one, Malva. This is critical."

She waved him off, deep in thought, and fell silent for a few moments. Delphox lingered on the other side of the table, eerily silent, and Laevus avoided its ghastly gaze.

"There might be someone," Malva said finally.

"Someone? Can you be more specific?"

"I heard about her when I was in Lumiose some years ago. It was just a rumor, something like that couldn't possibly be substantiated. But I wonder..."

Laevus was about to go on an apoplectic rampage. "Yes, *and*? Who is this girl?"

Malva blinked and looked up at him as though she'd only just noticed he was there. When she smiled, all the anger left Laevus like a deflating balloon as he silently wished he could be miles from here, away from *her*.

"Assuming the rumors are true and a certain eccentric professor has the hard evidence to back up his research claims, then I might be able to secure you a living Magus."

Laevus stared. "A...Magus? You mean the myth?"

"Oh, dear brother." Malva walked around the table, Darumaka still in her arms, and approached Laevus. He dared not move, dared not show weakness in front of her. She *loved* it when people revealed their fear. She ran a manicured finger down his chest, smiling softly. "Don't tell me you don't believe in Fairy tales?"

Laevus swallowed hard and said nothing. Malva lost interest after what seemed like eons and pulled away, and only then did he allow himself to breathe.

"Get started on your tests or whatever you need to do," Malva said, approaching the door and signaling Delphox to follow. She let Darumaka jump from her arms back to the floor. "I'll have your Magus soon enough."

Laevus watched her go, all voluptuous cruelty wrapped up in a tight little body and a puffy white parka. She took the heat in the room with her, and his buttocks began to ache from the numbness again. Darumaka rolled across the floor and bumped his sneakers. It poked its arms and legs out and blinked up at him.

"What're you looking at?" Laevus said.

Darumaka grunted and batted his foot with its stubby fingers. Laevus rubbed his stubbly chin, a nervous habit.

"Let's get started."

Malva would be back, she always was. Until then, he could prepare alone, just as he wanted it. This place was a frozen hell on earth, but it was his. And now he had something to work with. His fingers already itched to get started. Where had he put his scalpels and

screwdrivers? Preoccupied with this newest little worry and excited to be busy again, Laevus bustled about the lab, Darumaka rolling behind him.

3. Chapter 3

Wanderer
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

There was a time in his life when Alain felt energized, awake and ready to start the day, to go on an adventure. That time in his life, when he was young, when he was naïve, when he hadn't made the masochistic decision to train at the Tower of Mastery, was so far behind him that he could barely remember the feeling. Every day tested his physical limitations, and every night he felt as though he'd crashed through them, only to repeat the process the next day.

Drills began at seven in the morning, sharp. Korrina had not been kidding about the laps for those who overslept. Alain made that mistake once—Heliolisk had electrocuted his alarm clock in the middle of the night when he'd made the grievous mistake of letting the yellow lizard sleep in his room at the foot of his bed. The incessant ticking had irritated it. Alain had never run so many laps in his life. The island where the Tower of Mastery was situated was just north of Shalour across the bay, about four miles across. He ran from about eight thirty in the morning until dusk, and Gurkinn did not let him back inside once until the sun had set. Korrina had to bring him power bars and water in between her Gym duties, and only because watching Alain keel over and die would probably reflect poorly on her as a Gym Leader and his personal trainer. Alain made Heliolisk run with him until the poor thing could run no more. After that, it could have slept through one of Tyrantrum's Earthquakes, it was so exhausted. Yeah, never sleeping in again.

Gurkinn took tea just after dawn, and no one disturbed him during that time. Alain had started out eating a light breakfast right when he woke up to maintain his energy until the official breakfast at ten thirty every morning, but soon abandoned the idea when he kept vomiting it all back up once he hit the mat. First were warm-ups with the other Gym trainers and Korrina in the main arena to get everyone awake and moving. Then Alain joined the Gym trainers for a grueling cardio workout until breakfast—running, jumping, circuit training, the works. Hence the vomiting.

Breakfast was always with Gurkinn and Korrina, and they always invited one of the Gym trainers to join them, a different one every day. Alain watched a transformed Korrina socialize with her trainers, talk to them not just about their progress in the Gym, but also about

their personal goals, both for themselves and their Pokémon. He quickly discovered that they respected her not just as their leader, but as their friend. They loved her, the young and the old, the men and the women, the plebs and the couple Bellators that had found a place here. They were devoted to her, and she was devoted to them. Loyalty, it soon became apparent to Alain, was the cornerstone of the Shalour Gym's success, be it in the ring, in the Gym trainers' peacekeeping duties around the city and the outlying territories, and to each other. Korrina made a point of introducing Alain to every Gym trainer, and then reminding him that they had met whenever they ran into each other until he memorized their names, their Pokémon, their goals for training here.

After breakfast, Korrina would work in the main arena and oversee the Gym trainers working with their Pokémon. She would coach them, sometimes with Gurkinn's assistance, on how to move like their Pokémon, how to anticipate the next move, how to read the opponent's tells in a split second where there was no room for indecision. Fighters, Alain came to understand, were not muscular brutes with no other purpose than to smash and thrash. There was emotion in their fighting, an elegance that would forever be lost on Alain, a Titan with no real ties to Fighters in any meaningful sense other than what he heard and observed. But he could listen, and he could watch, and the more he did, the more he started to realize how much he'd been missing.

Korrina herself moved with a grace and fluidity that he could never hope to comprehend. There were a couple other Bellators among the ranks of the Gym trainers, Mack and Shiri, and sometimes he would get to see her spar with one of them while the others ran through whatever exercise she had them doing. It was like watching a prima ballerina dance Swan Lake, watching Korrina exchange blows with a fellow Bellator—Mack today. When she struck, Mack would move with her, let her graze him, then swing around, forcing her to twirl just out of range. Like oil and water, swirling together but always distinct from each other, as close as two opposing forces can possibly get without fusing.

It was beautiful, Alain grudgingly acknowledged. It was art, what she did. What he could never do, no matter how many years he spent training. It was in those moments, when she was so absorbed with the dance and her Bellator partner for the day and Alain watched her from the sidelines that he found her truly mesmerizing. Gone was the caustic tongue and the wary gaze that watched his every move just waiting for him to slip up, and instead she was all feeling, all instinct

and freedom as she moved without barriers, without worrying about training her opponent when she could just *live.* And her smile, the way it lit up those bright, green eyes and brought out the dimples in her cheeks... Damn.

But Mack and Shiri needed little coaching in hand-to-hand combat, being naturals themselves. They were here to work with their Pokémon in exchange for helping out the local Shalour Police Department. It was later that Alain understood she did it for fun, for her sake and for theirs. To unwind with one of your own in a way only they can understand. It was in the blood they shared, in the inheritance. As much as he couldn't look away watching her move in those times, he also hated the gnawing sensation in the pit of his stomach, the guilt that coated him like a second skin and reminded him that he would never know that feeling. He would never again experience that kind of harmony with his kin, with another Titan. Once a deserter, always a deserter. He was on his own.

While Korrina worked with the Gym trainers and their Pokémon, Alain busied himself in the weight room pumping iron. He used to be in the habit of working out his muscles, so this part of the day before lunch was his quietest and, in many ways, the only peace he got without having to interact with others. He worked with systematic efficiency, choosing a different routine every day from the ones drawn up by other Gym trainers. One day he'd focus on his legs, the next on his arms and back, another day solely on his abdominals. As a result, he'd toted around a constant ache for the first two weeks of his training as his muscles screamed for reprieve and he stubbornly denied them.

He would shower before lunch and change into a set of blue and black gi, standard issue for the Shalour Gym, in preparation for the afternoon activities. That was when the real fun started, or torture, depending on your perspective. Afternoons were reserved just for Korrina and him.

She always had Training Room Eight reserved for them, and she would run him through his daily hand-to-hand combat exercises, which generally consisted of her beating the living shit out of him and then giving him comments on how he could suck a little less next time.

"Oof!"

Alain hit the mat on his back, his favorite position, as Korrina loved

reminding him, and gasped for breath.

"Rule Number One, Alain," she chided as she caught her breath and wiped the sweat from her brow.

"Stay on my feet, yeah, I *know*," Alain grumbled.

"And yet you keep falling. You see how I'm not sure you're really listening?"

She grabbed two water bottles from the mini fridge and tossed him one, which he caught without looking.

"You do it on purpose," Alain returned after he'd gulped down half the bottle. "If I didn't know you so well, I'd suspect you like having me on my back."

Korrina sucked down a few gulps of cold water then dumped some of the liquid on her face. Her bangs darkened as she wiped them out of her eyes, and the water ran down her neck in between her cleavage, disappearing under her black tank top. Momentarily forgetting his frustration, Alain followed the path of a particularly fat water rivulet over the curve of her left collarbone and down over the modest swell of her chest.

"That a good view from the floor flat on your ass, Titan?"

Alain's cheeks flushed with embarrassment—not so much at being caught, but more at the fact that she knew what he saw when he looked at her like that. Admittedly, it had been a while since he'd gotten any action. Not since Astrid, now that he thought about it, and that was almost two months ago now. He groaned and fisted his hand in his sweaty hair.

"I hurt all over," he complained in a moment of self-indulgent weakness.

Korrina padded toward him and kneeled down. She gripped his chin in her fingers and made him look up at her. "Want me to kiss it better, baby?"

He frowned, but before he could ask her if she'd completely lost her mind, she swung around with her fist and socked him in the jaw. Alain went down hard with a *smack* on the mat. Blood and spittle sprayed over the floor in a sad little splatter near his mouth, and he coughed. The entire left side of his face throbbed as though his heart

had relocated into his cheek and had begun pumping acid through his veins instead of blood. He rolled over with the pain and resituated himself on his hands and knees, blue eyes alert as he searched for Korrina just in front of him.

"Korrina, what the actual fuck!" he spat.

She shrugged. "What? A kiss with a fist is better than nothing."

He gaped at her like she'd proposed they strip and paint each other with animal scat and initiate a Gym-wide game of Survival Capture the Flag. She smirked and got to her feet, then offered him a hand up.

"The pain will take your mind off your blue balls. Now get up. I still have another half hour to beat you into shape today."

No kidding.

It wasn't all miserable. He was getting better, slowly. He could feel it. His energy was lasting longer, he wasn't falling as much, and in those rare occasions when he caught Korrina in a hold, he was strong enough to overpower her with brute force. Most recently, about a month after the kissy fist incident, he'd caught her from behind, his arms wrapped around her middle and his hands squeezed around each of her wrists to keep her from squirming free.

Four seconds of absolute bliss. She froze, taken aback at being caught like an animal. For a terrifying breath, she was trapped and completely at his mercy. But like all these stolen moments with Korrina, it was over far too soon. She jammed her elbow backwards into his sternum, and Alain choked as all the air left his gut. She then lashed out with her feet to trip him up, but he'd been expecting that after all the times she knocked him on his back. So he bent his knees and caught her leg as it shot backwards, wrapping his leg around hers and twisting. They fell together with a grunt, Korrina on her stomach and Alain on top of her.

"Ugh, get *off*!"

Alain sputtered, having gotten a mouthful of her ponytail, and didn't register her indignant demand fast enough because all of a sudden she flipped him onto his back and rolled over him. Blazing green glared down at him from just inches above, and before he had to time to react, she pushed off him, got up, and snatched a sweat rag from on top of the mini fridge to dab her forehead and neck.

"Hey, Korrina," he said, swallowing the pain in his middle, "Do I get a treat for dragging you down with me, at least?"

She threw the damp, smelly rag at him in a fit, and he pretended to gag.

"Oh, shut up," she said, biting her cheek not to laugh at how ridiculous he looked.

"Hey, c'mere and give me a hand up. It's the least you can do."

She eyed him, skeptical, but relented and offered him her hand. He took it and, in a move she'd shown him a couple weeks ago, hooked his knee around her leg and used his weight to drag her back to the floor. She landed on his chest with a soft *thud* and immediately scrambled off him.

"You ass! I was *helping* you!"

Alain burst out laughing. "Your face!"

Yeah, he couldn't remember not being tired and he hurt in places he didn't even know existed on a near-constant basis, but it wasn't all bad. He was getting better. And he was keeping his word to Korrina and Gurkinn. He would do whatever it took.

Whatever it took, as it turned out on this crisp spring morning, led Alain and Korrina to their first field trip together on behalf of the Shalour Gold Mining Company. Alain had woken up today, nearly three months into his training at the Tower of Mastery, and found Korrina in the kitchen bustling about like a headless chicken. He didn't even get a good morning in when she threw him a granola bar and a water bottle and told him to change, he couldn't wear *that*.

"But these're my work out clothes. I wear this kind of thing every day," Alain said, sniffing the nondescript granola bar to try to figure out what flavor it was through the wrapper.

Korrina herself was dressed like he'd never seen her before in brown leather pants, boots with a low heel, a white button-up, and a navy jacket rolled up to the elbows. She chewed and swallowed a piece of her own granola bar and got that look like she was fed up with the very idea of Alain, which was pretty much all the time. "Not today, you're not. We've got Gym Leader business to take care of. You're coming."

"Whoa, hold up, Wonder Woman, I'm not the Gym Leader."

"Yeah, obviously, but I *am* and I'm telling you we're going. This is part of your training."

Alain gave her a withering look. "You mean, you have a problem and you're dragging me into it so you don't have to deal with it by yourself."

"Well gee, Alain, I thought you might want to get out of here for once and see some of Shalour and the Golden Coast."

Alain took a bite out of his granola bar and made a face. It was chocolate. She knew he disliked the chocolate ones. "What's in it for me?"

"I won't kick your ass today."

He rolled his eyes. "You know, I *am* getting better. You only knock me down four times a day now instead of, like, ten or twenty."

"Look, this isn't up for debate. Mack and Shiri are still with the police, they've been on duty all night and they're exhausted, so I'm not about to make them work through the day. And Grandpa doesn't do this kind of thing anymore, you know, so it's not like I planned—"

He put up his hands. "All right, all right, cool it. I'll go with you. What's going on? Is it serious?"

She blinked and her mouth twitched. Alain's gaze was drawn to the faint scar on her lip he'd noticed during their first spar. "Can you ride a bike?"

"Um, what?"

"A bike, genius. You know, two wheels, metal frame, once you learn you never forget?"

"I know what a bike is, Korrina." *Goddamn, woman.*

"Good. Wear something that won't rip."

He waved her off and headed back upstairs to change. "For the umpteenth time, you know I hate the chocolate ones," he called.

Ten minutes later, Alain was changed into jeans, a violet jacket, white undershirt, and a blue neck scarf he'd had with him for years. This far

north, spring was always a little chilly, and it was only April. He was pulling on a pair of fingerless, leather gloves when he met Korrina on the ground floor. She was holding two black helmets with chin guards. Alain stopped short when he saw her.

"When you said bike, I didn't think you mean *that*."

Two identical, red-painted dirt bikes, older models but well cared for, were parked outside on the dirt road leading from the Tower of Mastery to the short bridge that connected the island with Shalour City on the continent to the south.

"Problem?" Korrina swung a leg over one of the dirt bikes and gathered up her hair in a bun before slipping her helmet on.

Alain approached the other bike and ran his hand over the leather seat cushion. He grinned to himself. "Not at all."

After situating himself and pulling on his own helmet, Alain turned the ignition and revved the engine. It was relatively quiet, a soft purr. Korrina stored her kickstand and wheeled past him.

"Let's go."

She revved her engine and took off toward the bridge. Alain lowered the plastic eye shield in his helmet, kicked back his kickstand, and zoomed after her.

After crossing the bridge, it was a short ride to Shalour proper. He'd been out here on the rare afternoons off from training, mostly to buy supplies for his Pokémon or just to walk around, but there was never enough time. His Pokémon had seen more of the surrounding area than he had, allowed to roam in the rolling hills and forests west of Shalour to hunt and stretch their legs to their hearts' content. This was the first time Alain would be riding through the city and beyond it to the eastern territories.

Shalour was a coastal city with a local fishing industry mostly to support itself and its surrounding suburbs. The real money came from the mines to the east, and based on Korrina's general direction, Alain surmised that was where they were headed. The stories said there was so much gold under and around Shalour that it had spilled into the bay over the years as fine powder, degraded by sea and salt but never disappearing. It washed up on the shores as fine gold dust, hence the region's name. It was no wonder Korrina had a vested interest in working closely with the already top-notch law enforcement agency

stationed here. The gold mines were Shalour's bread and butter. If they were compromised, the entire economy could collapse.

Aside from the requisite financial district with its few skyscrapers and boutique cafés with overpriced lattes and scones, Shalour showed little traditional evidence of its wealth. The city was an old one steeped in tradition and history. The people used their money to live comfortably and bolster the security and police forces that worked to protect them from would-be criminals and feral Pokémon, but otherwise there was not much in the way of opulence or ostentation from the outside looking in. Maybe they were satisfied with what they had? Or they were naturally discreet? Alain wondered. No one is immune to temptation and greed, and yet in Shalour, there seemed to be little proclivity for it despite the literal gold mind its people sat on. Curious. He asked Korrina as much as they rode past city blocks crammed with the local morning markets, meat and fish and fruits and vegetables and baked goods.

"Not everyone runs on greed and lust, you know," Korrina said.

"I didn't mean it like that. It's just weird. C'mon, you have to admit that a city as rich as Shalour doesn't really look the part."

She rounded a corner, and they were heading toward the outskirts of the city to the northeast. "Maybe it's because the people learned their lesson a long time ago."

They slowed as they approached the edge of the city, where the paved roads gave way to animal trails and the vegetation became thicker. Alain could see the slope of the mines in the distance, and beyond them to the north lay more forest, which he knew from his conversations with Gurkinn was the site of a prime fishing spot, the convergence of an arctic current that originated north in Sinnoh and the warmer currents that dumped out into the Shalour Bay from the far south near the Orange Islands.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Alain said as they rode through the unpaved wilderness in single file.

"Just what it sounds like. Generations ago, people got so out of control with their greed, spending money on stuff they didn't need and cleaning out the mines faster than the workers could haul up more gold. One thing led to another, and the workers ended up going on a massive strike. Suddenly, there went the city's livelihood."

"So what happened?"

"The Gym Leader at the time found a creative solution to teach people a lesson. People who'd just been reaping the benefits of the mines learned how to hold a pickaxe, see what it was like to extract all that wealth they took for granted. In the end, some of the mines were closed down and the workers who used to mine them relocated to the fishing industry, which was really small back then. Now, we only operate one mine at a time and extract just enough to support the city at a comfortable level. The rest of the labor goes to the fishing industry."

Alain watched her back as they rode over a narrow animal path in the forest, surrounded by thick trees that blocked the sun. "So the Gym Leader invoked martial law and forced people to do what he wanted."

"Think what you want. His solution worked, as you can see from the way Shalour is now. People are wealthy, but most of them don't flaunt it. They have respect for the people whose shoulders they stand on."

The woods were beginning to thin as they came upon the mines, which were a series of tunnels and caves in the hills that had been cleared of trees. A crowd of uniformed police officers was gathered near the mouth of the northernmost mine, and that was where Korrina turned her bike. When they were close enough but still out of earshot, she parked her bike and removed her helmet. Alain did the same.

"I still don't get it," Alain said. "Gym Leaders are strong, I get that, but in the end they're just one person. How'd he get everyone to cooperate?"

When she pursed her lips, the scar on her lip wrinkled, drawing his eye. "Because the people respected him. He was the same Gym Leader who discovered Mega Evolution. They trusted him and his intentions for Shalour. Why do you think Mega Evolution's still so shrouded in mystery? He didn't sell the secrets or abandon this place."

She set down her helmet on the seat of her bike and walked toward the crowd of police officers, not waiting for Alain.

"So he was your ancestor," Alain said aloud to himself. "Hella big shoes to fill."

And he thought *he* had issues with his family.

Korrina was already talking to the police officers when Alain caught up to her.

"We tried investigating ourselves, but our Pokémon are too afraid of whatever's in there," the officer in charge, a man named Farron, explained to Korrina. He had a Litleo at his side that was busy licking its paw. "I sent Mack and Shiri home. We only just discovered this mine as the problem area before dawn, and they'd been at it all night with some wild Trevenant that wandered too close to the city limits line. No worries, of course, the situation's been dealt with."

"I appreciate the thought, Sherriff," Korrina said. "That's why I've come personally to deal with what's happening here while they get some rest."

"On that note," Alain interrupted with a smile, "what *is* going on here?"

Farron, a black man in his fifties with laugh wrinkles around his eyes and a steady, even gaze meant to calm while he assessed, turned to Alain. "Friend of yours?"

"Alain's with me. He's okay."

I'm okay, am I? Maybe she was going soft on him.

"Right, if you say so. Anyway, I was just getting to that part. Trouble is, we don't exactly know *what's* happening in there," Farron explained. "We know there was a mining shift on last night, just a few guys, I got the roster here." He handed a piece of paper to Korrina, who glanced at the list of names. "The shift manager told me everyone but one guy, Garza, clocked out this morning. I think Garza might still be in there somewhere. My officers and I went in, and suddenly Litleo and the others turned tail and ran. Whatever spooked them caused a rockslide in the mines. We barely got out of there with our lives, and now we've got no way to get back inside without help. And then there was the smell."

"Smell?" Korrina asked.

"Yeah, like shit drowned in vinegar and lit on fire. Pardon my language."

"No pardon necessary. I get the picture."

Alain frowned. "Do the mines usually smell like that? Or is this new?"

Farron eyed him, but it was impossible to get a reading on the old cop. The man was a pro. He'd probably still look like that if Yveltal

itself descended on Shalour now and tried to wipe out everyone in the city. "No, it's new all right. Never smelled anything like it. It was worse than death."

Korrina shot Alain a significant look, but he avoided her gaze. "Anything you'd like to add, Alain?"

He shook his head. "Not really, no."

"Anyway," Farron went on, "I pulled my guys out until you could get here. I did what I could, but I can't risk all my officers when we don't even know what we're up against, especially not with the mine so unstable. We'll be here to back you up, but frankly, I don't know how much use we'll be so long as our Pokémon are too spooked to get in there."

"No, it's okay, Sherriff. Alain and I can handle it from here. Just please stand by with the EMTs. If Garza's in there, we'll get him out. And we'll get to the bottom of whatever's going on in there," Korrina assured him, all business.

There's that 'we' again, Alain noted.

"You got it," Farron said. "We'll follow your lead. Take this."

He handed her a two-way radio, which she clipped to the front pocket of her pants.

Korrina nodded. "Ten-four, Sherriff. We'll be back with Garza before you know it."

She jerked her head toward the mine entrance, and Alain fell into step beside her.

"Ten-four? Seriously?" he teased.

"Listen, Titan, I'm already missing my chance to hand you your ass today, so the least you can do is not piss me off."

She walked briskly, and from his view of her profile, he noted the worry lines around her eyes and mouth, the way her fists were balled —something she never did. They stopped at the entrance to the mine, and he put a hand on her shoulder, hoping she wouldn't get the wrong idea and knee him in the balls before he could get a word out.

"Hey, look at me," he said softly.

Korrina shot him a look, but her usual stubborn venom was nothing but a shell of its former self. There was real fear in her eyes, but not for herself.

"We'll get that guy out," he said, giving her shoulder a squeeze. "Whatever's going on in there, it can't be a match for both of us."

"Forgive me for not swooning when my daily view of you is on your ass and out of breath."

He did her a favor and laughed, eyes closed and a flash of teeth and everything, and it was a shame, too, because he totally missed the look in her eyes at the sight of him smiling.

"Sure, I'll give you that," he said. "But it's not just me in there with you." He brushed his free hand over the three Pokéballs at his belt. "We'll get him out, I promise."

Korrina steeled her expression and turned back to the mine's entrance. It was completely washed out in inky blackness save for the wan lights nailed into the ceiling that did little to penetrate it. "Don't make promises unless you really mean them."

She took off ahead of him, and he stared at her back for a moment.

What did I say this time?

Bewildered but with no real way to solve the problem now, Alain jogged after her. The lighting in here was shitty, and he was no Reaper who could see perfectly in the dark. But he had the next best thing.

The flash of light stopped Korrina in her tracks, and Heliolisk shivered once it materialized, its tongue darting out to taste the darkness. It looked between Korrina and Alain before waddling toward the latter.

"Hey there," Alain said. "How about some light, huh?"

Heliolisk puffed out its frilled black collar, which began to spark with static electricity. Like a revving generator, Heliolisk began to pump invisible static shocks over its collar into the air that bounced off the walls, coiled around the dull overhead lights, and returned to it in the course of nanoseconds. It began to emanate a low hum, and soon the yellow lizard was glowing like a light bulb far brighter than the dingy mine lights. Suddenly, Alain and Korrina could see twenty feet in both directions.

"Huh," Korrina said. "Usefully little guy."

"Girl, actually," Alain corrected.

"The first time I saw you with Heliolisk, I thought it was the last Pokémon I'd ever imagine you with," she admitted.

Alain patted the short lizard's head. At this angle, Heliolisk's mouth shape looked like a wide, derpy grin. "Heliolisk's a Dragon descendant. She's my best Pokémon when we're talking sheer guts."

"Ah, well that explains everything."

She kept on, and Alain resisted the urge to sigh. Someday, somehow, he would figure out just what Korrina's deal was. But right now, they had a trapped mineworker to save. They continued deeper into the mine, Heliolisk lighting the way, for another fifteen minutes in total silence. The incline was palpable, and the air down here was stale and old. They came to a few forks in the main shaft, and Farron relayed the appropriate paths to take via the radio. Eventually, they came upon the sight of the cave-in Farron had mentioned.

"Wow," Alain said. "Tyrantrum could get us through, but he's not gonna fit in this mine shaft."

"Not a problem."

Korrina tossed out a Pokéball from her belt, and in a flash of light her Pangoro appeared, a black and white goliath of a cream puff. Pangoro, at ease in the dark cave, lumbered on thick, ungainly feet until it located Korrina and nudged her in the chest with its stout muzzle.

"Aw, hello big guy." She smiled and scratched Pangoro behind its ears, which earned her a pleasant grumble. "How would you like to break some shit, hm? Doesn't that sound fun?"

Alain got a chill listening to her coo to Pangoro like a mother whispers to her child. But Pangoro understood her meaning well enough and stood up on its hind legs. Its head almost touched the ten-foot ceiling.

"You might wanna stand back," Korrina advised Alain, holding out her arm and forcing him to step back whether he liked it or not.

"Yes, ma'am."

She ignored his cheek. "Hammer Arm."

Pangoro snarled and, as though transformed, balanced on the balls of its hind legs and charged at the site of the fallen rocks blocking the path. With all the grace and precision of any true Fighter, it wound up its right arm, which began to glow with a soft, white light, and punched the rocks with all its might.

The blast was instantaneous and earth shattering. Dust filled the air and got into Alain's lungs, sending him into a coughing fit as he covered his nose and mouth. The cave shook as though somewhere deep in the bowels of the mine, an earthquake rumbled to life. But when the dust settled and Alain opened his eyes, the path was clear. The rocks that had blocked it had been smashed to rubble and spread out over several yards in front, clearing the way for them to continue on. Now that the way was clear, the smell Farron had warned them about was free to wander.

"Oh my *god*." Korrina covered her mouth and nose and turned away from the path ahead. "What the hell is that?"

Alain smelled it, too, and blinked as his eyes began to water. "That's the smell of shit drowned in vinegar and lit on fire."

Korrina shook her head. "What could it be? You think that's a Pokémon?"

I think it's a hell of a lot more than one.

Alain said nothing, and Heliolisk hissed beside him as it tasted the air with its tongue, eyes narrowed. "C'mon, let's just go."

Korrina updated Farron that they had smashed through the cave-in site and were continuing deeper into the mine. She then followed Alain and Heliolisk as they wandered deeper into the mine, recalling Pangoro to spare it the fetid stench. The lights were out down here, possibly having lost power during the cave in—or due to whatever had caused it. Alain had an inkling, but he didn't want to say anything until he knew how bad it was.

The space was bigger down here, the ceiling a couple feet higher than it had been before and the cavern more spacious. The deeper they traveled, Alain started to notice something glistening out of the corners of his eyes.

"That's the gold," Korrina said. "The mine's teeming with it."

He stopped to admire a particularly fat vein, marveling at its dull sheen. "Wonder if your ancestor every set foot down here before he decided to curb Shalour's greed."

"He worked the mines himself," she said, not missing a beat. "He and his Lucario. Do you have something to say to me?"

He shrugged and wiped his eyes, watery from the overexposure to the rancid smell down here. "Not really. Just that you seem to have a lot in common with him."

Korrina searched his eyes for the lie he knew she suspected was there —Titans lie, after all—but she wouldn't find it. He wasn't mocking her, and he held her gaze daring her to say otherwise. She looked away.

"Lucario was the first Pokémon to ever Mega Evolve. It's tradition in my family that all Bellators train Lucario. Aside from that, I'm nothing like my ancestor."

Alain was taken aback by the force behind her tone, almost bitter, but she pressed onward before he could ask her about it or even really process it. Yet again, he thought about how little he really knew about Korrina. Something had happened to her, and it had changed her. He was here to better himself, for Charizard and for the people he cared about, but now he was curious. What was she hiding?

"Oh god." Korrina stopped all of a sudden. "I dunno how much more I can take. This smell is so gross."

Alain was about to respond when he stepped in something squishy. It was deep, and he felt the goop submerge his foot and leak into his shoe. "Aw, sick."

"What is it?"

Korrina moved to join him, but she squelched, too, and stopped short. "Ew, what *is* that?"

Something groaned deeper in the cave, a reverberating, wet sound that chilled the bone.

"Alain," Korrina said. "What was that?"

Heliolisk, who'd hung back a bit, began to hiss. Its collar rattled and sparked with the beginnings of a Thunderbolt, spooked. Alain peered at his feet and saw the very thing he was afraid he might find down

here.

"Goomy," he whispered back.

The little slug Dragons, a cousin of the putrid Grimer and Muk, blended together in a semisolid pool at their feet, their eyes floating amorphous in the sea of pale purple. They were more liquid than solid in this form, unable to do much but float in shallow, tepid swamp water. But this was no swamp. What the hell were they doing in here?

A few lumps rose in the lake of Goomy—Sliggoo, their more advanced, evolved form that could achieve corporeal form and move about relatively freely. They were blind, relying on their sensitive feelers to communicate and see, but they located Alain and Korrina through their lesser brethren easily enough and stared at them with hollow, milky eyes.

"Alain!" Korrina hissed.

"It's okay," he whispered. "Goomy and Sliggoo are weak Dragons. We can get past them pretty easy, just follow my lead."

"Are you fucking kidding me? Look at how many there are! What are they even doing down here? And why are we whispering?"

Alain waved at Heliolisk, and the nimble lizard leaped onto his back, securing itself by his shoulders with its head over his.

"Because they have sensitive hearing," Alain explained in hushed tones. "We don't wanna spook them, okay?"

"This cannot be happening. Slime Dragons, really? Did it *really* have to be slime Dragons?"

"Just follow my lead and stay quiet."

He grabbed her hand before she could protest and squeezed it to emphasize his meaning. Then with his free hand, he tapped into a part of himself he hadn't visited in many, many years. Taking a deep breath, he held out his hand, palm flat, and pointed it at the sea of Goomy before him.

"Move," he commanded.

Korrina's mouth dropped, aghast, as she watched the sluggish Goomy begin to part and crawl out of Alain's immediate path, leaving only a

layer of sticky goo in their wake. Alain stepped forward, pulling Korrina along behind him, and kept his hand forward. He eyed the Sliggoo positioned ahead of him and wove a careful path between them, not too close. If they sensed any hesitation, any hostility on his part, it could turn out very badly.

"How are you doing that?" Korrina said, her hand clammy in his.

"I can control Dragons and their descendants," he said, only half hearing her as he concentrated on willing the Goomy to do his bidding. "Never thought I'd use it again after I left the Apep Dynasty, but here we are."

"You're *brainwashing* them?"

"Just keep it down, I'm trying to concentrate here!"

Goomy were nothing special, popularly looked down upon as the weakest Dragons to ever walk the earth, but what they lacked in individual prowess they more than made up for in numbers. They reproduced like crazy and used their unique bodies to defend their older evolutions, sometimes amalgamating into giant waves of goop and drowning their enemies, sacrificing countless of their numbers just so their evolved leaders could survive. Normally, Alain could have controlled a Goomy in his sleep, but with so many around and those Sliggoo to deter on top of them, he was pouring all his concentration into making that path open up for them safely. Heliolisk sensed his emotional exertion and sparked, worried.

"Look, over there!" Korrina tugged on his hand and pointed to their right. "I think that's Garza!"

Sure enough, buried up to his chin in Goomy goop, a middle-aged man in a green uniform and a yellow hardhat was passed out on the ground. Alain swore under his breath, counting the Sliggoo that stood between Garza and them. They twitched their antennae, sniffing him out. They knew what he was. Dragons always knew. The question was, what would they do?

"C'mon, clear a path to him," Korrina whispered. "We have to get him out of here!"

"Yeah, I know, I know."

He could do this, come on, dude, that guy's life was hanging in the balance. Suck it up. A few Sliggoo were child's play, really, come on.

Heliolisk *alone* could take them. It would totally be okay.

"Move aside," Alain ordered the Goomy blobs in between Garza and them.

They parted slowly, but their movements buffeted the Sliggoo, the nearest of whom began to slither toward Alain and Korrina.

"Alain, you're shaking," Korrina said, closing her other hand over his.

He didn't reply as he calculated the rough distance between the Sliggoo and Garza and himself. He could make it if they kept moving, if he didn't lose focus. The closest Sliggoo wandered just next to Korrina, and Alain whirled, hand outstretched, and locked eyes with the blind slug.

"Stop," he said, deathly quiet but with enough force to penetrate the slug's slimy head.

Sliggoo let its mouth hang open, dripping mucous, but it didn't move any closer.

"There has to be a better way to do this," Korrina said. "Can't you bring Garza to the shore?"

Alain blinked. That might just work. "...I'll try. Stay quiet." He continued to focus on the Sliggoo that had confronted them. "Move him there."

He dragged his hand slowly toward Garza, then back the way they'd come. The sea of Goomy began to jiggle and slosh, and the Sliggoo made odd quacking sounds, wet and smacking like they'd filled their mouths with peanut butter and were trying to swallow.

"That's it," Alain said. "Move him that way."

It was a bit like looking through a kaleidoscope and trying to focus on all the images at once. Controlling Dragons depended on the Titan's blood purity, his level of control. Some were just better at it than others. Alain had been decent when he was a kid still under the Apep Dynasty's tutelage, but he was nothing like the great Dragon Masters —Lance of Blackthorn, Drayden of Opelucid, and Kalos's own Drasna, an elite Titan of the Apep Dynasty that even Champion Diantha respected.

Well, now wasn't the time to question his abilities or where they came

from. He had to help Garza and get Korrina and himself out of here before something really bad happened.

Maybe Astrid was right. Jack thinned your Dragonsblood and you're never gonna get outta here before something a lot bigger shows up.

Alain bit the inside of his cheek until he tasted blood, willing away the voice of guilt in his head. He had to do this, he had to get Korrina out of here. Heliolisk clucked over his head, its small claws digging into his shoulders as it nervously scanned the cavern.

"A little more, guys," Alain cheered on the Goomy and Sliggoo doing his bidding.

Garza's body was almost at the edge of the lake, while Alain and Korrina remained still in the middle of it. It was really getting hard to breathe through the stench down here, and Alain was wiping his eyes every couple of minutes now.

"You did it!" Korrina said once Garza was back on the mine floor clear of the Goomy.

Alain let his hand fall, and the slime washed over his feet almost up to the knee. Heliolisk croaked as its tail submerged in the slime. Faceless Goomy blinked up at Alain, undulating together like ocean waves.

Korrina tugged on his hand. "Let's get out of here. We'll have to figure out some way to deal with the Goomy later. Garza needs medical attention."

"Yeah, okay."

He was a little out of breath. It had been a long time since he'd coerced Dragons to do his bidding against their will, a feeling he was not keen on reliving if he could help it. At least Garza was out of the muck. Now to get out of here. He put out his hand again and took a steadying breath, ready to command the Goomy and Sliggoo to stand aside and let him pass.

Something rumbled from deeper in the cavern, wet and rattling like breathing through a stuffy nose. Korrina slid one of her hands up his arm.

"What was that?" she said.

Something sloshed behind them, and the Goomy began to gurgle,

releasing more noxious fumes that seared Alain's sinuses. The wet growling grew louder.

"Oh fuck," Alain hissed.

"What? You can't just say that in a situation like this!"

Alain looked behind them, eyes wide as he came face to face with the very thing he *really* did not want to deal with in an enclosed, dark mine prone to cave-ins.

"Korrina," he said. "Please don't freak out."

Sloshing through the sea of Goomy, a slimy behemoth lumbered toward them. Its long neck was hunched, suppressing its full height, which Alain knew from experience to be upwards of Tyrantrum's size. Lavender mucous dripped from its chin and neck as its mouth hung open, exposing a pale green tongue. Unlike its pre-evolutions, this creature—Goodra, the slug Dragon—was not blind. It narrowed its green eyes at Alain and Korrina, engorged antennae twitching, and raised its clubby fists.

Korrina whirled, eyes wide, and swore. "Oh shit!" She fumbled for a Pokéball at her belt.

Goodra roared, angry at what it could only guess were two intruders trying to harm its brood. The Sliggoo echoed its call, and the Goomy sea began to churn.

"Uh, time to leave!"

Alain yanked Korrina through the slime back toward Garza, but Goodra was not about to let them get away without paying for their intrusion. It opened its toothless mouth and generated a wicked red light, which Alain instantly recognized as a Dragon Pulse attack. 'Oh shit' didn't even begin to cover how royally screwed they were.

A flash of bright light, then Korrina shouting. "Aura Sphere!"

Korrina's Lucario moved like death on dark wings as it glowed blue and converted its physical attack power into a concentrated ball of energy that it hurled at Goodra's head fearlessly. Goodra fired the Dragon Pulse, and the two attacks collided in a scintillating racket of light and sound. The aftershock thrust Alain and Korrina forward, where they fell face-first into the Goomy goop.

Alain scrambled to right himself and get the slime out of his eyes and nose and mouth, gasping for breath. Heliolisk shrieked, equally slimed, and took off running over the Goomy, fast and light enough to run over them like a Surskit on water and Thunderbolting the Sliggoo that got in its way. It cleared a path to Garza, and Alain hastily grabbed Korrina's hand.

"Move!" he shouted at her.

Korrina's hand was slippery in his as he dragged her along. Lucario had done its job stalling Goodra. The slug Dragon was dazed, and Lucario trudged through the Goomy sea alongside Alain and Korrina. They were nearly at the edge.

Goodra roared, sticky and garbled, and all of the sudden the ground under their feet began to move. The Goomy churned and began to gather in a wave of sludge, while the Sliggoo prepared to power up Dragonbreaths that would surely peel the skin off Alain's and Korrina's backs if they didn't get the hell out of there.

"Korrina!"

She was way ahead of him and slapped her hands over his ears without warning. "Metal Sound!"

Lucario, slimy but always ready to fight, clapped its paws together and released a grating chime that Alain felt down to his bones. He staggered, Korrina's weight on his back dragging him to his knees, and a wave of nausea flooded his head and threatened to bring up that disgusting chocolate granola bar he'd had for breakfast. But the feeling passed, and Korrina's hands fell from his ears.

"Shit, Korrina!"

She rolled off him, dazed. Behind him, the Sliggoo and Goodra were equally dazed from Lucario's attack. The jackal landed next to Alain and Korrina, shedding a layer of goo and eyeing Alain with no small degree of disdain.

"Hey, get him," he said, indicating Garza. "I've got Korrina, but we have to hurry!"

Heliolisk shrieked again and fired off another Thunderbolt at the gathering Goomy as they crept closer to Alain, dissipating them for now. Alain slung Korrina's arm over his shoulder and got to his feet, supporting her weight. Her head lolled against his cheek. Lucario,

thankfully, had the sense to recognize a dire situation and wrapped Garza's limp arms over its shoulders to drag him out.

"Okay, let's go!" Alain said, taking off toward the exit.

Goodra roared behind him, but he didn't look back, concentrating only on getting the fuck out of here without getting Korrina or himself killed. It was an uphill run, and Lucario was much faster and fitter than him. Heliolisk brought up the rear.

"Eerie Impulse!" Alain barked.

Heliolisk screeched, its collar trembling with static electricity, and released a low-voltage shock that swept over the army of Goomy, Sliggoo, and the rampaging Goodra. The sea of Goomy exploded, its tidal wave thwarted once again, and Goodra lurched, roaring in pain as the attack momentarily crippled it.

Gotta get out of here, gotta get into the open!

He passed the site of the cave-in that had thwarted Farron's progress, and he suddenly remembered the radio Farron had given Korrina.

"Hey, Korrina! Can you hear me? You gotta wake up!"

She groaned, her cheek jostling his, and blinked, bleary-eyed. "What... Wha's goin' on...?"

"Hey, stay with me, this is important!"

Alain hiked her up against his hip, one arm around her waist and dragging her feet. She began to move them on her own a little, keeping up with him.

"Alain?"

"You with me?"

She blinked as he huffed and puffed, doing his best to keep up with Lucario ahead of them. Something gooey sloshed at his heels, but he dared not look back.

"Ugh, my head," she groaned.

"Yeah, remind me to give you shit about that suicide move later. Can you run?"

She shook out her head, taking back more of her weight as they half limped, half jogged to higher ground. It was dark as shit in here with Heliolisk concentrating on frying the Goomy that were slowly catching up to them instead of lighting the cavern.

"I'm okay, I can run."

She tested her feet, gritted her teeth, and fell into step with Alain.

Goddamn, he thought. Metal Sound could stun a fully-evolved Pokémon, he'd seen Charizard fall victim to it before. And here she was grinning and bearing it like a champ.

And outrunning him.

Goodra roared again, and a flash of red light was their only warning as it slammed into the wall, blind in its Outrage.

"Run faster!" Korrina called back to him from just ahead.

"What the fuck does it look like I'm doing!"

They were nearly back at the entrance, and Korrina radioed Farron.

"Get out of there!" she shouted into the walkie-talkie. "Code Redder than a Darmanitan's asshole! Get everyone out!"

Well, at least she knew how to make an impression. Goodra slammed into a wall and caused another cave-in, and Heliolisk had to Headbutt Alain out of the path of some falling rocks, after which it shrieked angrily, as though the cave had personally offended it. Alain got back on his feet and kept going, recalling Heliolisk for its own safety. The entrance was just ahead, just a little more!

"We have to lose them!" Korrina called back to Alain.

"How? They belong in a swamp! So unless you got one hidden in those leather pants, we're shit outta luck!"

"Oh my god, if we weren't running for our lives I'd smack you right here!"

Sunlight seared Alain's vision as he burst out of the mine entrance just as the tidal wave of Goomy tripped him up and sent him falling flat on his face, drenching him in slime anew. Korrina fell, too, but swift-footed Lucario managed to avoid the tidal wave and sprinted to safety with Garza.

Coughing, Alain struggled to his hands and feet where he came face to face with a Sliggoo ready to Dragonbreath him into the next dimension. He narrowed his eyes and projected all his anger at being knocked down—he was supposed to have a day off from falling on his ass!—and screamed at it.

"Back off!"

Sliggoo swallowed its Dragonbreath attack, wide-eyed and sweating mucous and unsure what to do. Alain ignored it and got to his feet. Korrina was also on her feet and dripping slime, but there was no time to check on her. Goodra burst through the mine entrance, collapsing the roof and finally stretching to its full height of nearly fifteen feet at the antennae. It glowed red with Outrage. Farron and his officers and the EMTs were standing by, but they all dropped what they were doing to gape in terror at the monster that had secretly been hiding out in the mine, unbeknownst to them all.

"To the north!" Korrina shouted. "It's all swampland! We can lead it there!"

Alain wasted no time. He threw one of his Pokéballs, and Tyrantrum coalesced in a flash of bright light. The red dinosaur growled at the sticky goop it had landed in, but Alain ran to its side and scrambled up onto its back. Korrina was right behind him.

"Give me your hand!" he said.

"What? You're gonna ride that thing?!"

He suppressed a curse and grabbed her hand, yanking her up onto Tyrantrum's back behind him. Goodra caught sight of its fellow Dragon and bellowed. Tyrantrum, never one to pass up an opportunity to beat the ever living shit out of something and take all the credit, happily answered Goodra's challenge and opened its oversized jaw in a roar that could make nightmares piss themselves.

"Follow me!" Alain called out to Goodra and its horde of Goomy and Sliggoo.

Tyrantrum turned and started picking up speed in a run—*thump, thump, thump*—over the forested wetlands on the peninsula northeast of Shalour. The Goomy once more fused into a huge wave, and this time they ferried their Sliggoo cousins as well as Goodra itself, as though the slug Dragon were surfing in for the kill.

"Do you even have a plan?!" Korrina shouted.

She was seated behind Alain with her hands around his waist while he fisted Tyrantrum's mane feathers and sorely wished he had his Brigandine leg bracers because he was going to feel this in the morning.

"I haven't gotten that far!"

"You idiot!"

She moved around behind him and threw another Pokéball. Hawlucha emerged in mid-flight, squawking in surprise at its surroundings. When it caught sight of Goodra rampaging behind it, it swooped out of the way.

"Flying Press!" Korrina yelled.

Hawlucha looped behind Goodra and began to glow white with power. In a blur of red, white, and green, the scrappy hawk hurtled toward Goodra and bravely struck it from above with hardened wings and talons alike. Goodra roared in pain, and it only became more enraged, never slowing.

Tyrantrum was bulldozing its way through the swampy wetlands, felling trees and uprooting the natural habitat, and there seemed to be no end to Goodra's fury. Dragons, man, they had such terrible tempers. Someone had said that to Alain when he was just a kid, and he had no idea why the memory came back to him now, but he couldn't remember the face or the name.

"That's it," Alain said more to himself than to Korrina.

"What?" She'd heard him. "Hawlucha! Make another loop!"

"No, stop!" Alain said. "We have to calm Goodra down, that's our only shot!"

"Well I'm super open to suggestions!"

They were running out of swamp to rampage through, and through the breaks in the trees Alain could make out the sea to the north. Flocks of Wingull took flight to escape the stampede, driven from their homes, and Wooper and Quagsire leaped out of the way into the muddy waters of the swamp in fear of Tyrantrum as it barreled past.

"On my signal, get ready to jump," Alain said.

"Jump? Are you crazy?!"

"Jump!"

He yanked her by the arm and they leaped from Tyrantrum's back, where they landed in the muddy morass. In seconds, the wave of Goomy sloshed over them and coated them in slime yet again. Tyrantrum skidded, its beady eyes searching for Alain.

"Head Smash!" Alain shouted.

Tyrantrum slashed the swampy ground with one foot, revving up like a Tauros, then lowered its head and charged at the Outraged Goodra. The two Dragons collided in an apocalyptic explosion of raw power and anger, and Alain, Korrina, and the Goomy and Sliggoo were repelled backwards. A thin tree broke Korrina's fall, and she broke Alain's. They landed together in a heap in the foul swamp sludge and Goomy goop, hurting all over.

Tyrantrum shook out its head, the reckless attack not enough to faze the obdurate Dragon, and snarled. Goodra, buffeted back a few yards, lost its Outrage glow, finally assuaged and a little disoriented. Alain got to his feet—this was his only chance.

"Alain!"

He showed Korrina his hand, a silent entreaty to stay back as he trudged through the muck toward Goodra. He then held up his other hand, slick with mucous and mud, toward Goodra and hoped beyond hope that this would work, that after everything he'd been through, those years spent in virtual indentured servitude to a family he'd never believed in will have done something that could help him just a little right now in his moment of need.

"Goodra," he said, barely recognizing his hoarse voice.

The lavender slug Dragon teetered on its hind legs, eyes swiveling and antennae twitching as it slowly reoriented itself. Green eyes, filmy and a little sleepy, sent a static shock down Alain's spine when they made eye contact—it could smell him. It knew what he was. Goodra, the slug Dragon with a power that could rival even Dragonite and Salamence and Garchomp, among the strongest of their bloodlines, focused all its fury and attention on Alain now.

"Goodra," he said again. "Take your brood, live here in peace."

There was a hierarchy among Titans. There were those that could exert control, and those that could not. The latter were the fortynblods, the diluted who could hardly coerce Dragon descendants, let alone true Dragons. Alain was somewhere in between, not the best but not the worst. Average, for one with the Old Blood in his veins. Maybe it was a little consolation, and it had nothing to do with him personally, but a rumor he'd heard some months ago came back to him now. A story about a fortynblod, a vander who'd grown up away from the influence of other Titans, had been the one to bring down Lance the Dragon Master, the golden child of the Taki Dynasty in Blackthorn. That she, in all her inferiority and lack of inheritance, had bested the Champion of Kanto and Johto at his own game by turning his control against him and sending him to the bottom of the sea along with his sea monster. Just a story, of course. But stories had a way of emboldening the small and the meek, the ones with an eye for change who just needed a little push, a little encouragement that *yes, they can*, and if they just tried hard enough, they might just get there. They might just do it.

Goodra's eyes dilated as it focused on Alain, its horde of Goomy swirling around it like a miniature ocean, and it let its mouth hand open, dripping mucous and daring him to challenge it. As if he'd dare. As if he *could.*

"Go," Alain said with confidence he wasn't sure he felt, but that he clung to because sometimes you just have to hold onto *something*, anything at all to stop that falling sensation before you hit the bottom. "Live in peace. You won't be disturbed here."

There was a moment then, something Alain would never forget, something he would never be able to explain to Korrina or anyone else, when Goodra heard him. It *heard* him, listened, as Gurkinn had implored him to listen on his first day at the Tower of Mastery. Listen, and you'll understand. For a moment, covered in slime and exhausted and scared half to death and trusting a power as old as time that he'd shunned in shame all his life up until this very moment, he heard Goodra, too.

The slug Draon blinked and closed its mouth, its long antennae drooping like ears, and it turned away from Alain. Extending its long neck, it sniffed the air and sloshed through the swampy water east, thick tail drawing a path in the muddy water behind it. One by one, the Sliggoo slithered after it, soundless, and finally the sea of Goomy

moved as one entity, squelching along over mud and mulch in pursuit of their leader and protector.

Alain watched them go, not even daring to breathe for fear he might break the spell. Tyrantrum sloshed toward him and lowered its massive head to his eye level, bumping him affectionately. The love tap knocked Alain over and plunged him into the muddy swamp on his ass. *What else is new?*

More sloshing behind him, and Korrina appeared at his side. She watched as Goodra and the other slug Dragons slowly faded among the thick trees, then turned to Alain.

"Okay. I don't know *how* you did that and honestly, I don't think I wanna know. But you did it." She paused and averted her gaze. "So...thanks."

"Hey, I'd be Goomy chow if it wasn't for you and Lucario, so back at you."

The moments of silence that passed then were almost peaceful, the first comfortable silence they'd ever shared, now that he thought about it.

"They must have been displaced," he said, feeling the need to explain on the Dragons' behalf. "People keep spreading out, and they must have left to look for somewhere they could live undisturbed."

"When you put it that way, I'm almost sorry we had to drag them out of the mines. But they'll be okay up here. I'll make sure of it. No one will develop this land."

She was covered in slime and mud. It was in her hair, all over her face, her clothes, and she reeked of bog as badly as he did. But those brilliant, green eyes blazed in the midday sun that peeked through the canopy, and she was almost smiling. Almost.

He held out his hand to her. "Help me up?"

Korrina narrowed her eyes. "Why?"

"Hey, c'mon, I *did* carry you out of the mine. I practically saved your life."

She studied him a moment, his lopsided grin that he didn't really mean. He got the eerie feeling that she saw right through him. "Yeah,

you did save my life in there."

He blinked up at her, unsure what to say. When she offered him her hand, he saw no other choice but to take it.

And then he pulled her down into the mud with him.

"Alain, you jackass!" Korrina screeched.

Alain burst out laughing. "That's the second time you fell for that!"

"Fuck you!"

He couldn't stop laughing, clutching his stomach, but he shut up real quick when she gathered up a handful of swamp mud and shoved it in his face.

"Ugh, what the hell!" he swore, wiping the grime from his mouth and eyes.

"You look better like that."

His eyes flashed with something primal, and she saw it very clearly. Korrina began to scramble away, but he was on a mission now. Ooooh, she'd really done it now. He scooped up two handfuls of bog runoff and hurled them at her. One sailed over her head, but the other hit her square in the chest.

"Oh my god!" she said, indignant.

He collapsed with laughter again, and Korrina struggled to her feet, armed with more mud in her hands.

"Okay, you asked for it, Titan."

Hawlucha squawked from a safe perch on a low branch, and Tyrantrum watched with disinterest, looking around for something it could eat. Unfortunately, there was nothing. It briefly considered Hawlucha, but the little bird looked bony and too much of a nuisance to catch. Fuck it.

By the time Farron and his officers found them, Alain and Korrina were in the throes of a full-on mud war, no mercy and no sidelines. Farron got the hint real quick and waved off his men once he assessed that the situation was under control, no one was hurt, the Dragons had dispersed.

Korrina had some seriously wizard-level accuracy, and she landed a direct hit on Alain right in the kisser with enough force to knock him down on his back. He wiped the gunk from his eyes and sat up, and he got an eyeful of Korrina seizing with laughter as she pointed at him.

"You look so gross right now!"

She was clutching her sides, unable to control the laughter, and tears streamed down her dirty cheeks as she gazed down at him. Alain held her gaze, momentarily stunned—he'd never seen her laugh like this before—and smiled. Really smiled. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd just let go, *lived* without worrying about anything but the moment. They held that moment, just the two of them, dancing green and sparkling blue, for what seemed like eons. Until Hawlucha clucked and Korrina got a mischievous glint in her eyes that did something achingly electrifying to the pit of his stomach and why wasn't she looking at him anymore, exactly?

Korrina lopped a gunk shot at Hawlucha, catching the feathered Fighter by surprise and earning herself a startled squawk. Then she burst out laughing all over again and lost her balance, falling backwards into the mud.

Farron had to haul them out of there by the arms. They were having too much fun to keep track of the time or Tyrantrum beginning to tear up the entire swamp in search of some slow Quagsire to chow down on.

As far as Malva was concerned, Lumiose City's only redeeming quality was its sheer size and population density that lent itself toward anonymity to those who sought it. You could really get lost in this place among the crowds of shoppers, the café-goers, the businessmen and women rushing to their next meeting across town. The cobblestone streets were hardly visible under all the feet, and the shining glass skyscrapers were as invisible to the bustling crowds too absorbed in their own lives as the boutique shops they rushed past, red and yellow and blue walls, hand painted, carved wooden signs, the smells of coffee and baking bread and sewer runoff stewing just beneath it. And if you knew where to go, you could escape that sea of people constantly on the move to a place where everything was still and quiet, the lights were dim, and the welcome was as warm as she would ever get.

It was raining today, just like it had been that first night when she'd

wandered into this particular restaurant years ago, disheveled and soaking wet and too pissed off to care. She hadn't even looked at the time—ten thirty at night, by the way—that first night when she stormed in here just to get out of the rain and sit down somewhere quiet with a bottle of red wine to fuel the wild fire of her fury.

Laevus, her *dear brother*, had sold her out to Lysandre just so he could undermine a rival scientist and get a promotion. A promotion! And he'd thrown his own sister under the bus, the only person in the world who could stand to be around him for more than five minutes, who could ignore the curdled milk smell of him from practically eating his weight in cottage cheese on a daily basis, who could rest assured that he would not backstab her for personal gain because *she was his fucking family* and damn if she'd made a point all her life to look out for him when their parents would have sooner rented out his room to a stranger, forgetting he was even there, their own son. All for a fucking promotion he would've gotten sooner or later anyway because he was a *genius*, she was the first to say it, but sadly he needed coddling, needed someone to hold his dick while he bumbled about his sterile lab always on the verge of something and never quite *getting there*, and there's probably a metaphor in there somewhere but *fucking shit on a stick* she was *so mad at him.* A part of her wanted to unleash Mega Houndoom and burn this fine establishment down—wherever the hell this was—but the wine. *The wine, honey.* Priorities.

It didn't look as shabby as the bars she haunted with her Team Flare associates. The booths were a supple brown leather, the carpets a burning carmine that simmered on low heat under the dim lighting. Black and white photographs of old Lumiose, before the skyscrapers and the suits and blaring billboards, decorated the walls. Some decorator knew what they were doing in here. The bar was dark mahogany and looked like it had been here for a hundred years. The wood shone with age and countless polishing jobs, the cricks and cracks smoothed over as though filled with wax. And the selection of drinks, everything from beers on tap to fine wines to whiskeys and bourbons and scotch in those crystal decanters that didn't say 'hide the label' so much as 'you don't want to know how much you're paying for this', made for a nice backdrop for the night she hadn't planned but was quickly getting very comfortable with.

She was going to kill her brother. No, okay, she wasn't going to kill him, but she was going to *hurt* him in a way he'd never forget. After her three-month suspension and ranger duty was up. Fucking Lysandre. She was his best agent, his *best*, and he knew it. She was loyal, she worked hard, and she never asked questions. That is, she

never got *caught* asking questions. She was Lysandre's right hand. That fucking skuff would be dead without her, she knew it. Who cared if he claimed to be descended from some ancient king no one even remembered? He was a skuff, plain and simple, a thin-blooded disappointment to his parents. Maybe that was why Malva had found it so easy to work for him, to believe in his drive. Laevus was a skuff, too, and look what he'd made for himself? Look what he'd done with Malva watching his back and picking him up and patching his ego back together? And look what that lard ass did the second he weighed her future against his?

"Ma'am, sorry to tell you this, but we're closing up soon and the kitchen already called in last orders about half an hour ago," the bartender said when he saw Malva slip into one of the polished wooden chairs, dripping wet.

She removed her jacket and slung it over the chain next to her, revealing her sleeveless black blouse that hugged her curves and showed a little midriff when she moved. Red pants ended just above her ankles, and black stilettos did the rest. She removed her sunglasses and set them on the bar, fixing her lurid gaze on the bartender, a young man still outgrowing his baby fat. He actually shivered when she turned her glare on him.

"I'm not hungry," Malva said. "But I'll take a bottle of whatever Cabernet you have handy."

The bartender shifted in his starchy black and white uniform. "The whole bottle?"

"What're you, my fucking sponsor?" She unclipped the seal on her clutch and wagged a credit card at him. "The bottle. *Now*."

"Um, okay, but I need to see some ID."

Malva blinked, almost not believing him. Twenty-seven and she needed a *fucking ID* to have a pity party? She considered the consequences of cupping her hands around this kid's butter face and letting her heat fill his cheeks, sear through skin and muscle all the way to the bone. No, too messy. She was having a shitty enough day, and the last thing she needed was local law enforcement sniffing around. With the luck she was having lately, Lysandre might find some way to blame her for drawing attention to herself and, by extension, Team Flare.

The bartender mistook her pensive hesitation for panic and took a step

forward. "Ma'am, your ID please?"

"Call me ma'am one more time and I'll shove my foot so far up your ass it'll be the only thing you say ever again."

The bartender gaped at her, white as a sheet, and sputtered. Malva had the ridiculous thought that he looked a lot like a Feebass she'd seen as a child in a tank at the fish market, wide-eyed and glugging and too dimwitted to know when to look the other way because that's Trouble you're gawking at, honey, and believe me, you do *not* want to sniff up that tree.

"Artie, is there a problem here?"

A tall man, blond and blue-eyed and so debonair he practically reeked of it appeared behind the bartender and put a slender hand on his shoulder. He was dressed in a food-stained white apron over a navy collared shirt and slacks.

"N-no, sir, I was just asking this lady for her ID. She ordered a bottle of the Cabernet," Artie the bartender stammered.

Malva's gaze flickered from Artie to the newcomer—clearly his boss if the way the kid was about to shit his pants was any indication. She locked eyes with the Boss and something unfamiliar, but not entirely unpleasant, buzzed down her spine, cold but not painful. He smiled, and it was a dashing smile which kind of pissed Malva off even more, and patted Artie's shoulder.

"Please excuse my bartender, ma'am," Boss man said.

Artie paled even more and took a few steps back. Malva had to bite her tongue to keep from giggling.

"He's new, and he hasn't quite gotten the hang of spotting teenagers among the guests."

Is that a compliment or did he just call me old?

"Artie, why don't you take table five's check and then head home for the night? I'll close up and handle the bar."

Artie nodded like it was the last thing he would ever do. "Sure thing!" He scuttled out of the bar like a Bug and hurried to table five deeper in the back of the restaurant.

"Now then," Boss man said, leaning over the bar and lacing his fingers together. "I won't ask for your ID, but I would ask for your name, if you don't mind sharing?"

Malva rested her chin on her palm and leaned into her elbow. "And if I do mind?"

"Then it will be a horribly embarrassing evening for me as I try to guess it."

Malva held his gaze, daring him, and after a few moments, he pulled away. Showing her his back, he selected a bottle from the rack, uncorked it, and set two glasses on the bar in between them.

"I never said I wanted company," Malva said.

"You also said you wanted the Cabernet, but I'm doing you a favor with this Pinot. Trust me...Kara."

Malva frowned. "Kara?"

"No? What about Laura? No, that's not right either. Camilla?"

"You have got to be shitting me."

He finished pouring their glasses and passed one to Malva. She sniffed it—bold, dark, and earthy—and took a sip.

"Well?" he asked.

Like you don't know.

"It's nice," she admitted. He knew what he was doing, she'd give him that.

Boss man smiled—not smirked, but really smiled, and goddamnit he had a nice smile—and raised his glass to hers.

"Cheers. I'm very glad to meet you...?"

"...Malva," she relented.

"Malva," he repeated, really tasting the name like he tasted that Pinot, nice and slow and savory. "Now I feel even sillier for my guesses."

She let him stew on that, not giving an inch, and he nodded, relenting.

"I won't subject you to further guessing games, so please call me Siebold."

Siebold hung his wine glass as though the effort was almost too much for his delicate constitution and watched her through those sleepy, blue eyes that seemed to see all of her all at once. The fury was still there under the surface, and she would nurse it for the three months of suspension ahead. But three months was a long time to plan, to plot a fitting consequence for her brother's selfishness. Maybe one night's procrastination wouldn't hurt.

She clinked her wine glass against Siebold's, the chime light and pure. "Siebold," she said by way of greeting.

They shared a drink, and then Siebold stood upright again. "Now, what can I get you for dinner?"

She waved him off. "I'm not here to eat. And by the way, if you're going to have that glass, feel free to take it off my tab."

He studied her a moment. "You're soaked from the rain, it's almost eleven on a Wednesday, and you show up here in my restaurant alone and broody like you're plotting the downfall of a nation. I think dinner and wine is the least I can do for you, Malva."

Something clicked, warning bells, and Malva put her hands on the bar. "Hold up there, Romeo. I'm not here to be wined and dined. I came to be alone, so cut the bullshit."

Siebold chuckled. "Romeo committed suicide. Believe me, I have every intention of walking out of here alive tonight." His sleepy blue eyes glowed in the dim lighting, and just looking at him made her sleepy, too. "But this is my restaurant, and I'll consider it a personal failure if you come and go with an empty stomach. Besides, that Pinot's no better than piss without some garlic parsley escargot to accompany it."

He gently nudged the credit card still in her hand and pushed it back toward her. "Please, I insist. Think of it as indulging my sins, not yours."

Buddy, you have no idea.

It didn't look like he was going to leave her alone, and she was already comfortably situated with a bottle of wine that was better than any she'd ever had. Whatever, who was she to say no to a free meal? After the shit day she'd had, maybe it would do her some good.

It ended up doing her good and a hell of a lot more. Siebold was an excellent chef, had been training since he was a kid with his mother, who ran this place before him with his father heading up the business side. Now it was just him, his parents having retired to Santalune to run a smaller café just the way they wanted to away from the hustle and bustle of the big city. He told her these things, and as the hours blended together with his heartbreakingly delicious food and the wine continued to flow, Malva found that she was happy to listen. When was the last time she'd had a normal conversation with a real human being that didn't involve mission protocols?

"And what about you?" Siebold asked after taking another sip of his wine. He'd lost the apron and rolled up his navy shirtsleeves. He had slender fingers, like a surgeon's, with a few knife scars from years in the kitchen. "I can't believe you're a consultant for Team Flare. That seems too boring for you."

Team Flare was, on the surface, a conglomerate business that dabbled in just about everything from management consulting to Pokémon research to even non-profit environmental projects. No one outside of the inner circle knew Team Flare's true purpose, and as pissed as Malva was at both Laevus and Lysandre, she would never betray the organization. It wouldn't suit her to throw away a source of power not yet fully reaped.

"Well, believe it. Sorry I'm not the exciting international spy you seem to hope will walk in here one night."

"No, you're mistaken. I'm sure your work is very interesting, and it doesn't matter what I think as long as you enjoy it. Besides, if an international femme fatale walked in here now, then we'd be interrupted and I'd have the unpleasant job of escorting her off the premises."

Malva half laughed, half snorted. "Yeah, right. What would you do, charm her out the door?"

"Oh come on, now, I can be persuasive when I want to be. I convinced you to try my cooking, didn't I?"

Malva raised her glass to him then downed the last two sips of her wine. "Only because I let you."

He said nothing to that, and Malva finished off a last bit of food.

"Well, Siebold, thanks for dinner, but a girl needs her beauty sleep and

all that shit. So I'll be off—"

Malva nearly slipped out of her chair, and Siebold caught her arm just before she could fall. She laughed.

"Oops."

"Let me get you a cab," he said, slipping out of his chair.

He stumbled, and this time it was Malva who had to catch him. She laughed again.

"You might need it more than me," she teased.

"Ah, I think you're right." He steadied himself on the bar. "I almost regret sending Artie home. Now I'll have to close up and try to stay on my feet."

"Oh, fuck it. You can clean up tomorrow."

"Hung over? Yes, excellent idea."

She bit her lip. Do I or don't I? "I could help you. Two hang overs're better than one."

He stared at her, and that little part of her that remained sober screamed in agony. *You idiot.*

She pushed off the bar, a little wobbly, and steadied herself on the back of a chair. "Wow, I can't believe I just said that."

The anger she'd stormed in here with was slowly returning, stoked by her embarrassment and the alcohol loosening her otherwise tightlipped tongue.

"No, that's, I mean I want— Malva, wait."

Siebold reached for her, and reacting on instinct, Malva grabbed his wrist hard. The anger and the alcohol and the general shitty day she'd been having until he helped her unwind poured out without really meaning to, and she channeled heat through her palm into his wrist, hot enough to boil blood and bubble the skin. Siebold gasped, and his wrist smoked where she'd grabbed him. But that wasn't smoke she was seeing.

"What the..."

Malva released him, and her fingers were coated in condensation. Steam rose from Siebold's wrist where she'd grabbed him, but the skin was intact, a little pink from the heat, but otherwise totally unaffected by her fiery touch.

In the few tense seconds that passed, a few things became very clear to Malva. One, she was no longer drunk. Two, Siebold was, without a doubt, a Tamer, a Syreni with an affinity for water. Three, he was a *fucking strong* Syreni to have been able to negate her fire touch without really thinking about it, maybe the strongest she'd ever encountered. And four, she was this close to either turning around and bolting out the door or throwing him over his bar and climbing on top of him.

Turns out, he thought through it all faster and pulled her to him, deciding for her. They crashed together, fell toward the plush leather couches in the lobby and missed them completely as they tangled together on the carmine carpet, and yeah he was a good kisser, how could he not be with that dashing smile and those sleepy eyes and those surgeon's hands that could cook up masterpieces in his kitchen? And now she got it, got that weird sensation of being surrounded, like the tide washing over her that she'd felt the moment he'd walked into her line of sight. It was him, all of it, flooding her senses like the sea, palms exploring—under her shirt, over her belly, in her hair, waves crashing against her with every touch.

Clothes became an afterthought, discarded and forgotten, and Malva's red-painted nails fisted his wavy blond hair, dragged over his strong back and trailed steam in their wake and *fuck* she loved that feeling, burning and drowning at the same time, like dying and being reborn and over and over and over again, and he could hold his breath for hours but she couldn't and she needed to give him something else to do with that clever mouth or he'd suffocate her and—

"Excuse me, Miss? Are you going in? Let me get the door for you."

A middle-aged man and his wife were peering at Malva standing there in the rain, getting soaked, and the man held the door open for her. She must have looked a sight to them, standing out here in the pouring rain alone, not bothering to cover up, just staring through the window and seeing a scene that had played out years ago, so lost in the memories.

The rain hit her cheeks, slid down under the neck of her jacket and beneath her shirt, steaming as it evaporated on her skin. But it wasn't

the same. No matter how long she stood in the rain and remembered, it wasn't the same.

"No," Malva said, red eyes peering through the glass at the carmine carpet, those same leather couches that had been here all these years, a different bartender—a woman this time, no sign of Artie—searching for a face that wasn't there. "Go ahead."

She stepped out of the way, and the couple entered the restaurant. She stood there a moment longer, wondering what the hell she was doing standing here like an idiot because if he saw her now, if he came out of the kitchen to grab more Merlot for his filet mignon and happened to look out the window and see her standing there, she'd be undone. She'd never leave, never finish what she'd started, and even though Laevus was a chauvinistic little leech, he was her brother and he was, as she'd always said, a genius, and he was going to succeed in this. It was only a matter of time, and that was where Malva came in. She would not turn her back on him like their parents had all his life. She would not abandon him.

Siebold would have to wait, if he was even still waiting for her. Five years and only two or three visits a year had a way of warping memories, making them fade and change into something else. She could wait. She didn't need carnal gratification, not for herself and certainly not to climb the ladder in Team Flare, but why shatter Laevus's misogynistic fantasies with the hard truth? He couldn't take it, couldn't *stand* that she was better than that, better than him, and not because she was born that way (because no one is born better than anyone else, not even Malva with her burning fingers, and there is always going to be someone better out there, someone who won't burn no matter what), but because she'd made it so, both for herself and for him. There was only one man whose touch she craved, but she could wait, and so could he. Family came first.

Malva turned away from the glass window looking into *Le Chalet*, Siebold's family restaurant on the west side away from the downtown bustle where she'd left a piece of herself to hide away, a part that would be there when she came back because otherwise, what the hell was the point of all this? She pulled up her hood to shield her bright, magenta hair from the rain, and disappeared into the grey misty city. She was running late for a meeting with a certain personal lab assistant with some important information concerning a young woman from Vaniville Town who was more than what she seemed.

The door to *La Chalet* opened, and a tall, blond man with simmering

blue eyes in a smeared apron jogged outside into the rain. He looked down the street both ways, searching through the gloom. The rain soaked his hair and his apron through, but he barely felt the chill as he breathed deeply. Greys and blues and purples, all washed out into the flooded storm drains and blending into a watercolor smear. No bright flash of magenta, no hot whisper on the back of his neck, though he was sure he'd felt something just a moment ago, a familiar heat he longed for in those sleepless nights, wondering when she'd be back, if she'd be back.

Siebold caught the rain in his palm, his skin absorbing the moisture, soft and supple. He closed his fingers in a fist, trapping the water like he could never trap a flickering flame, bright and hot and beautiful but never captured, never controlled, and always just out of reach.

Thank you to all the reviewers! Calem and Serena are back in the next chapter, I promise.

4. Chapter 4

Wanderer
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

Spring in Vaniville Town was its best season, as far as Serena was concerned. She could have stayed outside for days and nights on end, and sometimes she did. The forest was as it had been when she was a child, and as she had all those years ago, Serena would often run headlong into its verdant depths, swathed in curtains of vines and leaves, the trees thick as though they were huddled for warmth, but she knew her way around them. The forest stretched for miles and miles until it hit the base of the White Mountains to the east, which marked the way far to the north to frigid Snowbelle. Serena had never been, but she'd been as far as the mountains and back.

But no matter how many times she ventured into the forest, no matter where she traversed, how long she stayed out, she could never find that clearing by the stream again. She could never find the weird tree—Xerneas, Sycamore had called it. With her childhood naïveté, even the memory of her midnight flight had faded to mist at the edges of her imagination. The first time she couldn't find it, that first night back after a six-month stay at Sycamore's lab in Lumiose City, she'd chalked it up to bad luck. The forest was a big place, and she was only eleven at the time. The Poochyena never showed themselves again, not with Rhyhorn lumbering along beside Serena as she explored that first night back, sneaking out like she had the very first time.

She couldn't find it the second time she tried, either, or the third time, or the fourth. Until finally she realized that it wouldn't matter how meticulously she combed the forest, or how hard she wished. Xerneas was not coming back, not for her and not for anything. It had saved her life—saved, because even now she didn't want to entertain the truth of what it had really done to her and even Sycamore never brought it up once he'd gotten the story out of her, and Serena never wanted to see that look in his eyes ever again directed at her, like he regretted it all, her and his research and her entire existence—and then it was just gone. It was gone, and Serena was still here. The last Magus. All she'd ever wanted to do if she found it again was ask why.

Why do I have to be all alone?

But that was a stupid question, and as she grew older, Serena proved to herself and to the people around her that she was anything but

stupid. Her eleven-year-old self would have been proud of her, and maybe she would have pitied her. Don't you remember? You don't mind being alone.

"*It's okay to be different.*"

The years passed, and the trips between Vaniville and Lumiose became so ubiquitous that Serena could have made the trips alone with her eyes closed, but Grace always accompanied her to Lumiose for her stay—sometimes just a couple weeks, sometimes months on end, it depended on Sycamore's research progress. The lab became a second home for Serena, a sanctuary in the heart of a bustling city full of people she didn't know and would never know, the cobblestone and asphalt, the storm drains that collected rainwater and sewage and even some unsavory Poison-type Pokémon—Serena had learned early on to avoid those at all costs. They were the antithesis of Fairies and all they represented. Spawned from darkness, but Serena was not so afraid of the dark—even shadows had heartstrings she could follow back to the light. But poison was the corruption of life, living rot that infected and infested. Calem, of course, thought she was being ridiculous. They were just Pokémon like any others, and poison was no big deal if you had an Antidote.

Yeah maybe to a steel-nerved Adamantine, she'd chide him. Calem had a natural resistance to poisons. She knew this about him because she'd been there when he took a Poison Sting gone awry in her stead. They were sixteen at the time and Serena had wanted to get out of the lab for once, walk around the city. Sycamore always kept her so busy now that she was older, and it was rare that she had an afternoon free. Calem accompanied her, happy to oblige, but of course insisted on strapping Doublade to his back.

"What? She's resting, so she can't float on her own," he'd said like a sentient pair of swords would have appeared any less conspicuous.

Whatever, it was fine, but it was unlikely he'd be let into any of the shops if Serena decided she wanted to go try on a new hat. That was okay, he hated shopping, anyway, so he'd rather wait outside and be surprised by whatever new accessory she chose for herself.

It had been raining that day, and the heady musk of the sewers and asphalt runoff was redolent in the damp air. Serena and Calem had been taking a shortcut down an alley when they accidentally disturbed a small family of Croagunk that had wandered into the city's outskirts from Route Sixteen in search of food. It happened fast. The

Croagunk were spooked by the unexpected presence of people and Doublade's baleful aura, and the largest of the group fired off a Poison Sting to give its younger kin time to flee. Calem had moved fast, and Doublade was faster. Roused from its dormant state when it sensed the Croagunk, the twin swords flew out of their sheaths strapped to Calem's back and into his reaching hands. The glob of hurled poison splashed against their crossed blades, held together in Calem's hands, and spritzed Calem's cheeks and chest. The Croagunk hopped away to safety, and Doublade pulled Calem forward, but he held back the sentient swords by the purple ribbons around their hilts. The poison dripped from Doublade and down Calem's cheeks, and Serena remembered panicking because the Pokémon Center was on the other side of town and Sycamore's lab was a good twenty minutes of walking away.

The rain washed the poison down Calem's cheeks, smoking in its wake and singing his skin pink, but it washed away with the water and he smiled at her. They were both soaked from the rain, he and Doublade were splotched with poison, and he had the nerve to smile. And before her eyes, the boiling purple heartstrings that coiled around the globules of poison twitched and dissipated, as though denied whatever sustained them the moment they hit Calem's skin. The steely platinum of his natural heartstrings and Doublade's, infinitely intertwined, soon smothered the poison's miasma, obliterating it completely.

"Hey, you okay?"he'd asked as she watched it all happen, two oversized swords in each hand winking up at Serena with their ghastly jewel eyes.

Yes, she was okay and by the way, that was *her* line, she'd wanted to say, but what was the point? The poison had done little more than blister Calem's skin, and the rash would heal.

"*It's okay to be different."*

That day, that very moment in the rain with Calem in a dingy alley guarded by a set of swords possessed by the spirit of an ancient warrior was the first time Serena really appreciated Alain's secret promise to her as a child. If Calem wasn't different, he'd be dead.

And now, twenty-three and seated in the walled backyard garden she and Grace had cultivated over the years in Vaniville Town as she gazed at the forest over the ivy-covered wall and wondered about Xerneas, Serena leaned back on her hands and let out a long-held breath.

If she wasn't different, she would have remained dead in the forest all those years ago.

The sun was bright this afternoon, not a cloud in the blue sky. Serena removed her soiled gardening gloves and pulled her long, honey hair into a ponytail to get it off her neck. This far south, even early spring was warm enough for lounging. She wore a red and black checkered flannel button up, sleeves rolled up to the elbow, over a white T-shirt smudged with soil and grass stains and cotton pants cut off at the knee. Her gardening sneakers lay untouched next to the sliding glass door to the backyard, and she was barefoot in the grass. Grace was inside fixing a late lunch for them, and Serena enjoyed the quiet solitude she never experienced in Lumiose.

Something clinked softly near her ear, as delicate as a wind chime. Serena smiled and brushed her bangs out of her eyes. "Shhh, Klefki, you don't want to scare them. They're just babies."

Klefki, no bigger than Serena's cupped hands, hovered in the air. An odd Pokémon that went unnoticed by most people who weren't actively looking for it, Klefki was a Fairy with an eye for shiny things it could pick up with its slender, steel-plated appendages that it held clasped together like a key ring, anything from marbles to coins to jewelry. It would find and hoard anything shiny that it could lift, which was more than twenty times its weight thanks to its hardy Steel affinity. Its favorite collectible by far was keys. This Klefki currently toted around three keys it had pilfered over the years.

One was a brass skeleton key it had stolen from the hidden compartment of a jewelry box that had belonged to Grace and surfaced during a spring-cleaning two years ago. Grace couldn't remember what the key was for and allowed Klefki to keep the trinket. Another was a simple, silver key you might find on anyone's key chain. There was nothing special about it, but Calem had shown up with Klefki at Sycamore's lab after his turn with the Pokémon he and Serena shared and said Klefki just wouldn't let this key go. He didn't even know where it had found the key or what it unlocked. The last key was not really a key at all, but a shiny USB drive on a silver chain that Klefki had burgled from Sycamore's lab. Sycamore had assured Serena that there was nothing important on it, it was just one of the thousands like it in the lab used to store data, but Klefki was so taken with the little trinket that it would not let it go.

It was these three keys that clinked softly together now as Klefki hovered next to Serena, its red jewel-like heart pulsing with soft, pink

heartstrings amidst a ring of silvery ones encompassing it, as though its Steel frame existed to protect its Fairy heart. Klefki's beady, dark eyes and tiny mouth were rounded in little O's as it did what Serena said and tried to keep quiet.

Satisfied that Klefki would try not to make a racket, Serena reached over the flowers in the bed at her feet—red tulips and yellow daffodils and blue violets. She extended her fingers to the white calla lilies behind them, tall and fleshy, like chalices from which mythical forest nymphs might drink nectar or wine.

"It's okay, you can come out," Serena whispered.

From the center of one of the calla lilies, a small, white creature wrapped its small hands around the yellow pistil and poked its bulbous head around. Its head was smudged with yellow pollen, like a crown, and its dark eyes bore into Serena's outstretched fingers. White, wispy ears twitched as it listened for any signs of danger, and its little body tapered to a dark green ribbon that wrapped around the lily's pistil, anchoring it to the flower. It was about half Klefki's size and, like its fellow Fairy, noticeable only to those who knew where to look, to those who listened.

"Hi, Flabébé," Serena said, smiling.

Klefki jingled and floated closer to Flabébé, curious, and Flabébé huddled a little deeper into the flower. Serena ran her fingers over the lily's curling petals, drawing Flabébé's attention again.

"You're getting bigger every day."

Flabébé yawned, its pink heartstrings swirling lazily around it and weaving around the calla lily's petals and down its stem. One day, when it evolved into Floette, it would pick this flower that had sustained it since birth and share its life force with it, until finally merging with it as a Florges. This Flabébé, and the others, too.

Serena looked down at the blue and yellow and red flowers, and a small brood of tiny Flabébé peeked out from the petals of their flower homes. Klefki grew very excited and jingled its keys, spooking some of the smaller Fairies. Serena smiled.

Grace had suggested building this enclosed garden years ago. Perhaps it was an attempt to keep Serena from running off into the woods all the time. Maybe if she could bring the beauty and tranquility of nature home, her nemophelist daughter would spend more time at

home. Serena had not been interested in the idea at first, but Grace quietly proceeded with it anyway. One day, Serena woke up and there was a stone wall around the backyard and a picket fence gate leading to the sidewalk. And Grace was hunched over in ratty jeans and a sweat-stained yellow shirt, a scarf tied up in her short, auburn hair and a trawl in her hand as she laid out fresh soil and planted a multitude of flowers and herbs. From the look of her, she'd been at it for hours under the hot summer sun. That was nearly ten years ago, and now Serena had made the garden her mother had built with her own two hands her very own oasis, a place where she could listen. It was as close to the feeling of being in that clearing under the weird tree as Serena was ever going to get. There were no words she could muster to properly thank her mother for this, and maybe she didn't need any. Grace would never understand, but she did her best.

Klefki's keys chimed as it hovered lower over the hiding Flabébé, and Serena held out a hand for it. "Let's let them sleep, okay?"

Movement behind her, then a rustle in the grass followed by a soft mewling. Serena twisted her upper body around, still sitting, and something soft rubbed up against her. The creamy feline twitched its long coral ears, swishing the long ribbons of fur extending from its mane, and meowed again. Serena petted the Pokémon's back, marveling at its softness and the little spark of energy that danced under her fingers when they made contact.

"Did we wake you, lazy bum?"

Sylveon yawned and stretched out its front paws, lowering its entire front half low over the grass, and exposed deadly sharp nails that dug into the earth. Klefki chimed just above it, but Sylveon ignored the smaller Fairy. It had never much gotten along with Klefki or any of Serena's Pokémon, for that matter. Except Rhydon. Something about that rocky rhino that was more than twice Serena's size was okay in Sylveon's book. But Rhydon was in its Pokéball for now, too big to roam around the garden. Later, Serena would let Rhydon out to hunt for its dinner in the woods, and Sylveon would likely join it. They were an odd pair, to be sure.

Sylveon meowed again and rubbed against Serena's shoulder, so she decided to indulge it. Turning around, Serena raked her nails through Sylveon's cream and coral fur, just enough force to give it a good scratch, and earned herself an immediate and mellifluous purr. Sylveon rolled over on the ground onto its back, paws up and bent at the wrist, and enjoyed a belly rub like a common house Skitty. Serena

laughed.

"Oh, I see how it is. You just decided it was convenient to get a free belly rub, hm?"

Sylveon purred and batted her wrist lightly with its back paws. Serena had received Sylveon when it was still an Eevee as a gift from Sycamore. She was fourteen at the time and overjoyed at the prospect of having another small Pokémon for Swablu to play with. Rhyhorn was a big sweetheart, but it was more likely to accidentally Stomp on Swablu than run around playing with it. And Rhyhorn didn't play well, anyway. Even less so now as a Rhydon, now that it was bigger, smarter, and possessed a proclivity for violence and blood that its pre evolution did not. Aside from being a heartfelt gift from the man who, in many ways, had become something of a father figure in Serena's life, it was also another small experiment.

Eevee's line, it was long suspected by Pokémon researchers, would only evolve under specific circumstances. In the wild, Eevee tended to evolve based on its surroundings, be they flora or fauna or mineral, over the course of many years. With trainers, however, Eevee would never evolve unless it was under the care of a Tamer with a compatible affinity. Thus, an Eevee belonging to a Reaper would evolve into Umbreon with enough care, and one belonging to a Crystallos would eventually evolve into Glaceon under similar conditions.

Sylveon, the Fairy Pokémon, was the rarest Eevee evolution of all since the Magi had died out some hundreds of years ago. Few had ever been spotted in the wild, their natural aversion to humans making it difficult to capture and study them. Serena's Eevee, as Sycamore had hypothesized, evolved into Sylveon after four years in her care and provided a long-awaited living specimen for him to observe.

The day Sylveon had emerged from its Pokéball after weeks in the transformative process, Sycamore had fainted outright. Here was concrete evidence in support of not only David Elm's—the leading mind in Pokémon evolution—theories, but also Sycamore's own research around Fairies and their Magi counterparts. Poor Dexio, Sycamore's personal assistant since Serena had first arrived at the lab, had to carry his boss to a couch and fan him until he came to.

Serena picked a long blade of grass and tickled Sylveon's nose. The feline's misty blue eyes widened and it batted the makeshift lure with

its paws, instantly absorbed in the game. Serena's eyes followed the flow of pink heartstrings that extended from Sylveon's middle and curled around the blade of grass, up Serena's arm, and mingled with her own. Chirping from the house drew Serena's attention then, and Klefki jingled excitedly.

"Serena, I've got lunch. Are you hungry?" Grace said from the doorway.

Fletchling chirped again from Grace's shoulder.

"Sure, Mom. I'll be right in."

She got up, and Sylveon rolled over to stand. By now, the Flabébé had all retreated into their flowers, completely hidden. Maybe one day, when one of them evolved into Floette, Serena would tell Grace about them. They'd shown up one day out of the blue, hatched from eggs that had drifted on last fall's breeze to settle on the flowers, as though driven by an innate sense of direction.

Serena gazed briefly at the stone brick wall that boxed in the ample garden and backyard. It was taller than she was, though not quite as tall as Rhydon, and it gave Serena the privacy and quiet she craved whenever she was back here with her Pokémon. The old oak tree she'd used during her clandestine escape as a child sat in the corner, its branches extending over the top of the wall. This wall doubled as a perfect deterrent to the neighbors' wandering gazes. Some trainers and Tamers had Fairies in their teams, it was nothing particularly odd. But no one had a Sylveon, or a garden full of Flabébé, or a mysterious migratory lifestyle that put them constantly between Lumiose and Vaniville, often for months at a time, for reasons unknown. Grace never said a word and Serena never asked, but it was a compromise they could both live with. The fewer the people who knew about Serena, the better.

Serena scooped up her gardening gloves and headed inside after Grace. The table was set for two—grilled cheese sandwiches, a large bowl of fruit, two glasses of water. Sylveon trotted to the plush couch in the living room just to the left of the kitchen table and curled up. Fletchling eyed it warily, naturally averse to such a predator, but Sylveon never so much as glanced in Flethling's direction. It had once, and Serena quickly made it clear that the little bird was off limits.

Klefki floated beside Serena as she took a seat opposite her mom at the table and leaned in close to the grilled cheese, smelling it. Grace

eyed the odd Pokémon. It wasn't hostile or vicious, but Grace was always a little off around Serena's Fairies. Some fancy psychologists might say she suffered from some kind of complex, perhaps the latent guilt over her own daughter successfully evading her detection and all search efforts for five weeks, or maybe the fact that her daughter was *more* now, and more doesn't always mean better, and that's not Grace's fault, the shrink would reassure her, and she's doing a hell of a job all things considered.

Serena took a bite of her sandwich, which was hot but not too hot and loaded with plenty of cheddar and Gruyere and Jarlsberg, just like she liked it. "This tastes great, Mom."

"I'm glad, sweetie." Grace eyed Klefki's jingling keys as she reached for the fruit bowl in the center of the table and served herself.

"Don't worry about Klefki," Serena said, noticing her mother's look. "He'll find his own food later."

Serena served herself some fruit once Grace was done with the bowl and ate. The silence between them was not uncomfortable, but it was noticeable.

"It's been nice to have you back here," Grace said, taking a sip of her water. "You were gone three months that last time."

Serena nodded. "Yeah, Professor Sycamore's been studying Mega Evolution a lot recently."

"What's that?"

"It's like a kind of evolution beyond the regular evolution."

"Well, what's it got to do with you?"

Serena shrugged and took another bite of her food. "It's not really about me specifically, but he's trying to figure out what it is that makes Tamers able to Mega Evolve Pokémon when plebs can't."

Grace frosted over. "I see."

Serena bit her tongue, feeling a little guilty. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean... You asked, and that's what he's researching, so..."

Grace studied her only daughter. "Serena, do you like staying in Lumiose at the lab?"

"...I don't mind it. And Professor Sycamore's great. He's really brilliant. You... You should really come and stay for a few days next time, see what they do there. It's so much more than you could probably even imagine."

Grace was silent for a few minutes. "I'm glad you get along with Augustine." She used Sycamore's first name. "I know he's a good man."

The air between them changed all of a sudden, as it was wont to do in times like this. Grace's pale heartstrings, faint and sluggish like those of all plebs, throbbed in time with her racing heart.

"I do get along with him, Mom," Serena said. "He's the closest thing I've had to a father."

Grace smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Then I'm glad. He's helped you a lot, I can see that. Are you done, sweetie? I'll clean up."

She stood up to take their empty plates, and Serena stood up with her. She grabbed her plate just as Grace reached for it. "I'll listen," she said softly. "Mom, whatever you don't wanna say, I'll listen."

Grace held her daughter's gaze, the same sky blue, Serena's favorite color. "Let me take that to the kitchen to wash, okay?"

Serena let her take the plate and watched her head to the kitchen to start the dishes. Klefki chimed softly, its beady eyes upturned in wonder and its jewel heart pulsing faintly. A wave of concern washed through Serena, and she held out a hand for the little Pokémon. Klefki's keys jingled. Grace was busy with the dishes when Serena followed her into the kitchen.

"I don't blame you," she said.

Grace scrubbed a plate with the sponge and didn't look at Serena.

"He left us both. You're not the one I blame."

Grace stopped and dropped her sponge. When she turned to look at Serena, her eyes were misty with unshed tears. Serena reached in front of her mother and shut off the water.

"Oh sweetie," Grace said, her voice cracking. "It's not your fault. It had nothing to do with you. Your father didn't leave you, he left me."

Serena shook her head. "No, you're wrong. He left, and you stayed.

And I know... I know you did your best."

Grace searched her daughter's face. "Serena..."

It was okay to be different. Her father, a stranger she had not seen since she was barely old enough to remember him, had disappeared without a trace. He wasn't here to make Serena grilled cheese sandwiches, or to build a lavish garden he didn't need simply because his daughter might like it, or to know when it was time to stop asking about racing Rhyhorn and let his daughter follow a different path no matter the reason. He wasn't here to see how things had changed, to realize he didn't understand it, that he'd never asked for this and probably didn't want it but Grace was doing her best anyway because Grace always did her best in races and washing the dishes and struggling to raise her Magus daughter as a single mother, and that made all the difference in a world that would never be perfect, anyway. There is no truer test of bravery than to face the unknown and embrace it wholeheartedly. Grace Gabena, for all her faults and shortcomings and the mistakes she would surely make in the future as all parents are prone to make, was the bravest person Serena had ever known. That was enough.

"It's enough," Serena said. "Everything... It's enough."

Klefki clinked its keys, perplexed, and Grace blinked at it. Serena put her hand on her shoulder and spared her a small smile.

"Thank you for lunch."

Grace slowly laid her damp hand over Serena's and nodded. "You're welcome."

Serena smiled and excused herself to shower and change. Half an hour later, she stood in front of the full-length mirror hanging over her closet door and examined herself. She wore a high-waisted red pleated skirt, sleeveless black blouse, black tights, and a matching red hat over her loose, long hair. It wasn't her favorite color, but she'd always liked red.

Alain's heartstrings had been red, the only red ones she'd ever seen on a person. He was a Titan, Sycamore had told her, a Dragon Tamer. But she hadn't seen Alain in years. He used to be at the lab in Lumiose all the time when she was a kid, but as the years went by, Sycamore sent him into the field more and more—a Titan could be trusted to watch his back more than the average pleb—and she would often miss him entirely when she visited the lab. Then, almost four years ago,

Sycamore told her that Alain had decided to leave his employ for new ventures, but he couldn't give her any details. Alain had just decided to move on, and that was that.

Serena wasn't stupid. Now that she was older, she knew what it meant for Alain to be a Titan on his own and the significance of Sycamore overlooking all that and taking him in. Alain had always seemed a little sad to her, even when he was smiling in that way that still made her stomach flip even after all these years. He was the brother she'd never had, the one she wished she still had close by, the one she missed every day no matter how much time passed. Was he okay? Had he found a new calling? Had he ever settled things with his family? All questions she couldn't answer, and that he was no longer around to answer now that she was old enough to ask.

Sighing, Serena grabbed a pair of white-framed sunglasses from her dresser and fitted them over the brim of her hat, smiling at her reflection. Klefki jingled happily, and Sylveon ignored the scene completely from its spot on Serena's bed, napping. Serena glanced at the wall clock.

"It's getting late. He should be back soon. Wanna go meet him?"

Klefki positively vibrated with happiness, and Serena giggled.

"Sylveon, come on, boy. I bet you're getting hungry."

She headed downstairs, listening for Sylveon as it stretched and hopped off the bed to follow her down. At the front door, Serena grabbed a pair of black boots and laced them up.

"I'm heading out for a bit," she called to Grace in the living room, who was reading a newspaper.

"Okay, sweetie. Just remember to stick to the side roads in you're taking Sylveon, okay?"

"I will, Mom."

The side roads would be all but deserted at this time of day, and Sylveon would not be spotted by the neighbors. Even if it was, everyone in Vaniville was a pleb. The families had lived here for generations and rarely got visitors or outsiders. Grace and her daughter were the rare exception, but the town had been happy to receive a famous Rhyhorn racer, and the Gabenas never caused problems or interfered with local politics. The only topic of gossip was

the daughter's frequent trips to Lumiose, where she would stay sometimes for months at a time, but the locals assumed it had something to do with Grace's racing career, never mind that she was retired now and only raced for charity events every so often.

Serena closed the door behind her and led Sylveon and Klefki down the walkway toward the edge of the woods. After looking around for any sign of onlookers—there were no human heartstrings glowing anywhere in the vicinity save for Grace's—she tossed out a Pokéball.

Rhydon appeared in a flash of light, big and mean and heavy. It was a fearsome Pokémon regarded as highly dangerous and volatile in the wild, and only skilled trainers ever dared to tame it. But Rhydon had been with Serena for twelve years now, having evolved from a stout Rhyhorn and remained at her side all this time. At nearly ten feet tall, Rhydon was young and still growing. Serena knew from her studies that Rhydon lived upwards of 150 years and could reach heights of thirteen to seventeen feet, depending on gender and diet and habitat.

Rhydon lowered its craggy head and showed Serena its horn, a wicked shale and keratin spear as long as her forearm capable of spinning fast and strong enough to Horn Drill through even Blastoise shell and Onix hide with age and proper training. Right now, Rhydon's horn would be used to hunt for its dinner.

Serena reached for the towering rhino and patted its snout. "Hello, Rhydon. I bet you're pretty hungry, huh?"

Rhydon grumbled, and Sylveon leaped up its shale scale back to perch on its shoulder. Serena looked between them, forever amazed at how well they got along. Sylveon swished its coral tail, tickling Rhydon's ear.

"Okay guys, I'll see you later tonight."

Rhydon swished its massive tail and lumbered toward the forest. Each step it took dented the grassy earth, but the neighbors knew she had a Rhydon. Funny how it was more acceptable for them to know about this beast that could single-handedly plow through Vaniville and kill everyone in it without breaking a sweat than the twenty-pound feline perched on its shoulder. But Grace's paranoia was not without merit. Magi were supposed to be extinct. If word of Serena's true nature were ever to get out to the wrong people, she could spend the rest of her life in a lab somewhere being operated on and dissected until there was nothing left of her.

She thought of Alain again. The sun was low on the horizon now, prime hunting time for the predators in the forest, but they would turn tail and run when they got a whiff of Rhydon and Sylveon. Somehow, Alain had set off by himself despite the stigma and baggage that followed him as a Titan. She wanted to understand, to think that she of all people could relate. One of a kind and all alone. They were the same, weren't they? But he was gone and she was still here, and she had no idea when or if she would ever see him again.

Klefki jingled all of a sudden. Something had caught its attention and it floated west in the direction of Vaniville proper, but Serena's eyes were skyward as she searched for the shadow she was sure she'd seen in the corner of her eye.

"Serena!"

That familiar voice lifted Klefki's spirits to new heights, and it zoomed away from Serena to the newcomer. The shadow Serena thought she'd seen swooped low over the horizon and was gaining speed as it neared. She grinned.

"Hey, I didn't think I'd find you out here!"

Calem jogged toward Serena, his travel pack still over his shoulder—he hadn't even stopped at her house, instead coming straight here to look for her. A massive sword half as long as he was tall was strapped to his back, along with a robust, golden shield over it. Serena turned and smiled brightly at him.

"Calem!"

Dressed in black pants, boots, and a blue and white jacket with his dark bangs in his eyes and panting a little from the exertion of clearly having jogged all the way here from the outskirts just to see her, Calem was prettily flushed. Klefki nearly bumped his chest as it hastily floated toward him, clinking and clanging. Calem grinned at the little Pokémon, happy to see it after the long stint apart.

The wind picked up, and Serena turned her gaze skyward. The shadow was nearly upon them, and it brought with it a fierce gale as its powerful wings brought it in for a smooth landing.

"Whoa!" Calem shielded his face from the gust and grabbed poor Klefki before it could be blown away.

An eight-foot Flyer touched down behind Serena, its downy white

wings twice as long as it was tall and spread magnificently. Its cerulean belly was puffed out, the feathers recently cleaned after whatever kill it had made on its long hunt, and its tapering blue tail feathers dusted the ground behind it. A sharp, straight beak bore flecks of dried blood from its meal earlier, perhaps an unsuspecting Grotle or Audino. Great, white wings, at one time ungainly and burdensome for its small body but now the heart and soul that lifted it into the sky like any true Dragon, folded and gathered around Serena as it lowered its head to her eye level.

"Welcome back, Altaria," Serena said, petting its head.

"Yeah, way to steal my thunder," Calem said.

Serena laughed, and after a few moments, Calem couldn't help but laugh with her.

"Serena!"

Calem ran to her and scooped her up in a hug, twirling her around. She laughed and hugged him back.

"I thought you weren't coming until tomorrow," Serena said when he put her down.

She was a few inches shorter than him even with the hat.

"Yeah, surprise! I missed you, you know, so I thought I'd leave early. Uh, is that okay? I mean, your mom and all..."

"Of course it's okay."

Klefki hovered in between them, and Serena unclipped a Pokéball from her hip. She handed it to Calem.

"Here you go. I know Klefki's excited to spend time with you after so long here with me."

Calem accepted the Pokéball and wagged it in front of Klefki. "Aw, did you miss me, little guy? Well don't worry, now you and me can have some fun while Serena's cooped up in the lab."

Klefki jingled its keys happily.

"Oh, that reminds me. Look what I found in the grass on my way here." Calem fished around in his pocket and produced a small, black

metal key. It had an intricate bow reminiscent of a knot, and the triple bit was weathered and smoothed. "I'm guessing it was outside lost for a long time since it got all decayed. But check it out, three bits. I've never seen one like that, you?"

Serena shook her head. Klefki flitted around the key, inspecting it and squeaking hurriedly.

"So what do you think?" Calem said. "Better than that thumb drive you like so much?"

Klefki unhooked its feeler arms and reached for the odd key. It looped its little arm around the bow, careful not to drop its other trinkets, and lifted the key out of Calem's palm. It was heavier than Klefki's other keys, but the Steel Fairy lifted it easily and secured it in its key ring arms.

"I tried giving Klefki some old keys I found in my room, but he didn't like any of them," Serena said. "How do you always know what he likes?"

Calem shrugged. "I'm gifted like that."

Serena crossed her arms, and he laughed.

"Kidding, kidding. I dunno, maybe I was a Klefki in a past life. Who knows?"

Altaria folded its wings and balanced on its long talons. The middle toes on each of its featherless feet had nails so long and curved that they couldn't sit flat on the ground. Altaria clicked its talons on the sidewalk and tilted its sleek head. Serena petted the crest on its forehead, her eyes staring at the air around Altaria.

"You're looking at them right now, right? Those heartstrings?" Calem said.

Serena nodded. "Altaria's are red, like Alain's used to be."

Calem made a face at the mention of Alain. "Yeah, he's been gone for years."

"I know we'll see him again, someday."

Calem shared a look with Klefki, but the Keychain Pokémon was too happy swinging around its new key to pick up on his mood.

"Well, even if we don't, it's no big deal. You know what they say about Titans and all. After what happened with Champion Lance over in Kanto I'm not super eager to meet another one."

Serena frowned. "Alain's not like that. Don't you remember him at all?"

You bet I remember.

The guy was nice enough, always a hard worker according to Calem's mother, who had worked in Sycamore's lab alongside him. But he was a Titan, and Calem's father had warned his young son to steer clear of Alain because of it. Titans were all out for themselves, especially the ones that were on their own. You couldn't trust them. Not even their own kind trusted them—why else would they be out on their own when Titans were notoriously clan-oriented?

Serena had always gotten along with Alain since they were kids, though, so Calem put up with his presence when he had to, which wasn't often. Alain was busy, and Calem had school during the days when Serena would be busy working with Sycamore. If Calem and Alain ever crossed paths, it was with Serena between them. Looking back on it, maybe Alain had planned it on purpose to leave Serena and Calem be, let her hang around a kid her own age while he had work to do. If so, then good for him, because that's exactly how things should be, if you asked Calem.

But Alain had left one day, quit Sycamore's employ despite all the years of loyalty Sycamore had shown him. The good professor had taken him in when no one else would. Now that he was older, Calem knew the significance of such an act of faith on Sycamore's part, and he suspected Alain had known it all along, too. Maybe that also explained why he kept his distance whenever Calem was with Serena. Better that she grow up with someone more like her, a kid whose greatest worries were bickering with parents or how late he could stay up at night. Not a guy who'd run from his family, who'd lived in shame and secrecy for most of his adolescence on the back of a man whose heart was too big to turn Alain away. No, Serena didn't need to get mixed up with that kind of baggage. Guys like Alain, who dragged troubled behind them like bums toted body odor, tended to get the trusting types like Sycamore and Serena killed.

It was better that he was gone, for everyone. Maybe Serena had gotten along with him, but she was also shipped off to a lab to be tested and studied by an overwhelmed, overstressed parent at the tender age of

eleven with no friends and no family and nothing familiar around her. If Calem had been in her shoes, maybe he would've latched onto the first person like him that he met, too.

"I remember that he left without so much as a goodbye to you four years ago. And I remember I found you crying when you found out he wasn't coming back at all this time."

Serena traced the air just next to Altaria's head with her fingers. Calem tried to imagine red ribbons dancing in the wind, just like she had described to him countless times when they were growing up. They must be beautiful, he imagined. Even the draconian red, passion and blood and power, must be captivating. It captivated Serena now, just as it always had when she looked at Alain.

She'd told Calem his heartstrings were platinum, just like Aegislash's blade. They swirled around him like armor, she said. Silver was colorless. There was no passion or blood or power in silver like there was in the crimson Serena traced with her fingers now. But there was a kind of tranquility, a quiet strength born of ironclad will. He would not bend under any sword, would not cave under any hammer. And even the fiercest passion couldn't sway him from what his heart had decided on.

"I'm not defending him for leaving," Serena said, letting her hand fall. "But you're wrong about him. You never gave him a chance."

They were still standing by the edge of the forest where Calem had found her. Tracks leading away suggested that Rhydon had passed by here recently, maybe to hunt for its dinner in the woods. It would be back within the hour, he guessed. Enough time to take a walk with Serena, put this behind them, and catch up after two months apart.

"Look, I don't want to talk about that guy, okay? I came to see you. And Klefki, obviously."

Klefki swayed on its own invisible wind, squeaking. Serena eyed the little Keychain Pokémon.

"Klefki's riding your heartstrings," she said, her eyes far away as she saw what Calem would never see.

"Huh? What, like, right here?" He ran his fingers just under Klefki's dangling keys, but he ended up disturbing Klefki. "Kinda risqué, don't you think?" he teased.

Serena laughed. "You disrupted the flow. Here, lower your hand."

She took his hand and lowered it, letting Klefki hang in between them over their clasped hands. Calem watched her eyes as they glowed with a light invisible to him, admiring as they darkened to a shade close to Altaria's breast feathers. Klefki began to sway again, dancing to its own secret song.

"Right here." Serena indicated the space above their clasped hands. "He likes the confluence."

Her hand was warm in his, and without thinking, he closed his other hand over hers, enjoying the feel of her. Serena blinked and smiled at him a little, misunderstanding.

"Now it's mostly platinum, with a little pink," she said.

Calem searched her eyes, but she wasn't really looking at him. "So Klefki can see them, too?"

"Mm. All Fairies can. It's how they find me."

"So, when I take Klefki, you can always find me?"

Serena's eyes focused as she shifted her attention to him finally. "Huh? Oh, I don't need Klefki to find you. You know that."

She took her hand back and reached for a Pokéball in the pocket of her skirt, which she used to recall Altaria. Calem let his hands fall and resisted the urge to sigh. Klefki squeaked at him, miffed and no longer swaying.

"Tell me about it," Calem said under his breath.

"What was that?" Serena said.

"Uh, a walk? How about it?"

Serena considered for a moment, her eyes lingering on his travel pack.

"This? It's not heavy. I just brought enough for tonight and tomorrow."

"And Aegislash?"

He'd forgotten he was even carrying Aegislash. The phantom sword's weight was almost imperceptible on his shoulders after so many years carrying it around as a Honedge and later as a Doublade.

"Aw, c'mon, Serena. You know how incredibly strong I am. I could carry you, too, if you want."

She rolled her eyes. "Ha ha, hilarious."

"No seriously, you wanna check out these puppies?" He flexed his arms through his jacket, but they were no bigger than the average twenty-three-year-old's biceps. "I call this one Destiny, and that one's Imperator Furiosa."

Serena bit back a laugh. "Like that movie? You're so weird."

"No, really! Check it out, I'm even thinking of getting a tattoo of 'Mom' on Destiny here." He kissed his arm through his jacket, and Serena couldn't take it anymore.

"Okay, I don't know this guy," Serena said, looking around as though warning off a crowd that wasn't there. "He's a total stranger, and we're definitely *not* best friends."

Calem grinned in that way he had that said Serena was in for his latest scheme or adventure and she really had no say in the matter.

"Calem, wait—"

She was too slow, and he scooped her up over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and began parading around with her.

"Don't listen to her, ladies and gentlemen, Serena's my number one fangirl. Look how she's swooning!"

"Calem, I swear, put me down!" she said through her rising laughter.

"What's that? Spin you around? Anything for my number one fan!"

He began to spin slowly, then a little faster.

"I'm wearing a skirt you weirdo!"

She was almost in tears from laughing so much at this point, and he was doing his best not to collapse in a fit of laughter himself.

"And what a stylish skirt it is, folks! She's always dressing up for me!"

Klefki jingled in Calem's face all of a sudden, wanting to join them in their fun, but it startled Calem and he lost his balance. Before he could even get out a yelp, he and Serena toppled to the ground on the grass

next to the sidewalk, he on his rear and Serena sprawled half on his lap and half on the ground. Her hat had fallen off and rolled away a short distance, sunglasses and all, and her hair was mussed in her face.

She brushed the hair from her face, a little flushed from laughing, and put a hand on his arm. "What's with those names, anyway? Your biceps are female?"

He waggled his eyebrows at her salaciously. "Hey now, if you wanted me to name one after you, you coulda asked."

She laughed again and pushed him lightly, but he grabbed her shoulders and dragged her down onto the grass, where they both burst out laughing again. By now, Aegislash had woken from its slumber and hovered over them, not wanting to be dragged into whatever human antics involved rolling around on the grass laughing like a pair of idiots. It floated somberly over them, while Klefki continued to jingle and look for a way to join in whatever they were doing but sadly finding no opening.

"Okay, but seriously, you didn't actually name your biceps...right?" Serena said, the last of her giggles still lighting up her face.

Calem looked down at her as he propped himself up on an elbow. It would have been so easy, as she was waiting for his answer, still in the last throes of laughter, her hair splayed over her shoulders and in the grass. He reached down with his free hand and tucked her bangs behind her ear, testing the waters, but she barely noticed the contact, watching him expectantly for an answer. It would have been easy for anyone else, but when she looked at him like that, like *he* was anyone else, it became the hardest thing in the world. And he wouldn't do that to her. He wouldn't take from her the only friend she'd ever had.

He smiled, not the mischievous one that brought out the obstreperous boy he sometimes indulged when they were laughing and he was spinning her around and the world paid them no mind, but the one he kept just for her when she was really looking. "C'mon, let's take that walk and then get something to eat. I'm starving."

She let him help her up and smoothed out her skirt while he retrieved her hat.

"Hold on, you never answered my question."

He shrugged and waved to Aegislash to follow them. Klefki buzzed

around his head, jingling frantically. "What question?"

"About naming your biceps."

"Oh."

He finally paid Klefki some attention and set the little Keychain Pokémon on his shoulder. Then he started walking down the sidewalk, Aegislash in tow.

"Wha— Calem!"

"Yeah?"

"My question!" She jogged after him.

"What question?"

Serena sighed, exasperated, and he bit back a grin. "You're so weird."

"Hey, I remember when you said I was pretty when we were kids," he said.

"You can be weird and pretty."

"As long as I'm more pretty than weird."

She side-eyed him, skeptical. "I dunno about that."

"Stop, you'll make Destiny and Imperator Furiosa sad."

"Oh my *god*."

Calem laughed, and they walked into town, enjoying the late afternoon sun and the rare chance to talk to the only other person in the world around whom they each could really relax. And the neighbors paused their incessant whispers to watch the two of them stroll by, curious, because as rare as it was to see a floating demonic sword and sentient key chain tailing two young people, the smile on Serena's face was an even rarer sight to these people who saw her every day, watched her grow up, and knew next to nothing about her.

After the incident with Goodra in the mines, things began to change, and not necessarily in a linear fashion. Korrina had warmed up to Alain in her way since he'd first arrived here, he'd admit that. And she'd grown on him, too. But after the Goodra crisis, he was sure he

felt a real shift in their relationship.

And that's a loaded word—*relationship*. It's a word you read in novels or hear thrown around by adults who've been burned in love (and yeah, twenty-seven is an adult in most cultures but Alain would be the first to admit that he was as much of a child as Mairin in a certain light, which included mud fights in a swamp). Where was he? Oh right, *relationships*.

To argue semantics, there were many appropriate situations to which the word 'relationship' could be ascribed. Take Korrina's *relationship* with masochism. He'd tried to be fair, think about a logical reason for *why the ever living fuck* she would fight Lucario one-on-one *while it was Mega Evolved*, but Alain was a man of action, not a man of thinking, and he was coming up really short. The only thing that made him feel better about it was Gurkinn's obvious distaste for the practice. Korrina's response? Practice when he wasn't around. That was when Alain stumbled upon her in Training Room Eight after hours.

He arrived just in time to watch Lucario punch her hard in the gut, keel over through the pain it felt through contact with her, and then land hard on the floor under Korrina's reactive chop to the shoulder blades. Both of them fell, struggling in their shared pain, and bless that Lucario, man, it got up and readied itself to keep going. Korrina needed a minute to catch her breath.

Speaking of relationships, Alain had been feeling pretty good about the one between Korrina and him, speaking from the barely platonic perspective of one who daily had his ass handed to him by a blonde bubblegum Amazonian with a smile that really hurt him to look at. Not physically, that was the ass-handing, but somewhere a lot deeper than the physical pain could reach because every time she did it (and it was more and more, he liked to think), he knew she would eventually look away and fade again, like she felt guilty about whatever simple joy had drawn it out.

Kind of like she faded the minute she saw him staring as she got up, Mega Lucario hovering over her. "What're you doing down here?" she demanded, opening the door to confront him.

She was holding her side and hunched over, green eyes ablaze with adrenaline and the ache. Alain kept his hands loose by his sides and resisted the urge to cross them.

"I'd ask you the same thing, but I think I got the picture. If you wanted

an excuse to get your ass kicked, just stand still and I'll be happy to oblige."

Maybe he'd said something wrong, because she flipped him the bird and shut the door. Alain clenched his fists to stop the involuntary twitch, then followed her into the training room.

"What part of the universal hand sign for 'fuck off' wasn't clear to you?" Korrina said.

Mega Lucario glared at Alain. Its rippling muscles were emasculating to look upon, and it was breathing through its mouth—damn, how long had they been in here? He wasn't sure he wanted to know.

"What're you doing in here?" he countered.

"Alain, I'm going to hurt you if you don't get the hell out."

"Then hurt me, if you can."

She huffed. "I wasn't kidding."

"Yeah, me neither. At least if you whale on me you won't feel it as much. ...Unless, that's the point?"

Korrina didn't answer right away, instead sniffling and wiping her face with a sweaty rag. Alain's hands suddenly felt heavy, his palms clammy. Heat rose in his neck, and his back between his shoulder blades began to sweat.

"Korrina," he said softly. "What's going on with you? How long have you been doing this? Why?"

She threw down the rag and searched his eyes. "Excuse me?"

Alain took a step toward her. "Why are you torturing yourself?"

He was naturally taller than her by a couple inches, nothing to be proud of, but it was enough to give him a view of her he didn't normally get. Standing there still like that, she was just a woman, lithe and small of frame compared to him, hair in her eyes and a scar on her lip and the soft curve of jawbone that drew his eye as only a woman can draw a man's eye. Suddenly, without reason or thought of the consequences she would undoubtedly bestow on him with her fists and knees, he was struck with the overwhelming urge to reach for her, to hold her to him, because when the woman who's picked you up and

shouldered your sorry ass back into reality for the last several months without asking for anything in return looks at you like that, there's no other appropriate reaction.

But this was Korrina, and she was pragmatic to a fault. Unfortunately, her fault happened to be her temper, which she unleashed now upon Alain and his heathen questions.

"*Don't* touch me." She swatted his hand away before he could get within a foot of her. "Get out. Now."

"Korrina, I just—"

"No, stop, just stop it! You have no idea who I am or what I've survived. It's none of your business what I do."

"Look, don't be like that, just let me—"

"I said *out*, Titan!"

She lunged and smacked his chest with her open palm, sending him stumbling backwards. He didn't fall, but he caught himself on the door handle. He stared at her, torn between screaming at her and just slugging her in the face. He'd never make it, she'd stop him, but he was mad enough that he might just catch her off-guard. Ultimately, it was her clenched fists that made the decision for him. Her knuckles were white, and she was shaking, and he hardly recognized her.

So Alain picked himself up and stepped back through the door. "Sorry to disturb your training."

He showed her his back and stalked off, listening as the door slid closed behind him.

The next day, Gurkinn and Korrina both went into Shalour for Gurkinn's doctor's appointment, and the Gym trainers busied themselves with their own workouts. Alain had not slept much last night, but he lay in bed late into the morning just staring at the ceiling. By the time he wandered downstairs, it was past ten and he couldn't stomach the idea of joining the Gym trainers to work out. He grabbed a granola bar from the cabinet, a water bottle from the fridge, and headed outside to the beach.

The island that housed the Tower of Mastery was four miles across, and there was plenty of palm forest to disappear into. The sand was

hot on Alain's feet and the palm trees offered little shade, but he was in shorts and a T-shirt and prepared to sweat. He tossed out a Pokéball, and Charizard appeared in a flash of light. Before Charizard even fully coalesced, Alain slit his palm with the pocketknife he'd brought and approached the orange pseudo-Dragon.

"I hope you're ready for a work out," he said, touching his bleeding palm to Charizard's chest.

The Mega Evolution was instantaneous. Alain's blood seeped into Charizard's scales and dyed them an apocalyptic black, stirring the Dragonsblood dormant within Charizard and fusing their auras. Mega Charizard spread its wings and cast a steep shadow over Alain and the stretch of beach behind the Tower of Mastery. Alain stepped back and tossed out his remaining two Pokéballs. Tyrantrum and Heliolisk immediately zeroed in on Mega Charizard and were on their guard.

"Tyrantrum, Heliolisk," Alain addressed his Pokémon. "Today, I want you two to attack both Mega Charizard and me. Just practice, but don't let me off easy."

Heliolisk made a curious clicking sound, while Tyrantrum eyed Mega Charizard, already bored. Alain ran a hand through his hair.

"Hey, buddy," he said to Mega Charizard. "You and me, okay? We're in this together, so I'll watch your back."

Mega Charizard opened its jaws in a snarl and spat a small blast of blue fire. Tyrantrum lowered its head, tiny front claws clicking.

"I mean it Tyrantrum, Heliolisk. Don't go too easy on us."

Heliolisk puffed out its collar and began to spark, while Tyrantrum's tail began to emit an eerie, red glow with the beginnings of Dragon Tail. A small part of Alain began to wonder if this was such a good idea, but all of a sudden Heliolisk lunged, sparking, and he was forced to roll out of the way or suffer electrocution. Mega Charizard roared and took flight, but Tyrantrum ran after it and swung around with Dragon Tail. Mega Charizard caught the attack in its claws, and Alain felt a tingle in his hands, but Mega Charizard pulled and threw Tyrantrum into the sand.

Heliolisk skidded in the sand and lashed its tail. Like Tyrantrum before it, it also powered up a Dragon Tail and jumped at Alain with a screech. Alain waited in the sand, loose and limber and very aware that if he was even a second too late, he'd get thrown into the nearest

palm tree, probably crack a few ribs, and vicariously injure Mega Charizard in the process. Adrenaline tingled his toes and fingertips and his vision tunneled, focused completely on Heliolisk. The frill-neck lizard lunged, tail flailing, and Alain jumped with all his strength. He cleared Heliolisk, bounced off its head with one hand, and landed behind it safely.

Heliolisk skidded in the sand, its attack dying down, and it scrambled around to stare at its trainer, confused. Alain almost laughed, but the ground began to shake as Tyrantrum Bulldozed toward him. With no time to dodge, Alain threw up his hand and shouted, "Stop!"

Tyrantrum ate sand as it used its head to slow its momentum, dark eyes dilated as it responded on instinct rather than recognition. Something hot coursed through Alain's veins, the same heat he'd felt in that moment when Goodra heard him, understood him. Tyrantrum spat out sand and shook out its feathered mane, and Alain patted its broad snout.

"Like riding a bike," he mused.

But best not to dwell on that thought. This power existed, that was all there was to it. He didn't have to ruminate on the whys and hows, but he had to admit it was his best shot in a world where certain people could see perfectly in the dark to slit his throat or heal mortal wounds with an open flame or go toe-to-toe with a Mega Lucario and walk out okay.

"Okay," he said, more to himself than to Tyrantrum, who'd shaken off the drunken daze of Alain's temporary control. "Again."

He hadn't realized how late it was until Gurkinn himself wandered outside and found him drenched in sweat but taking a break from his own physical exertion to have Mega Charizard work on concentrating the force of its Dragon Pulse. Sinister draconian energy blasted over the waves out to sea as Mega Charizard fired off the attack, doing its best to focus on intensity over speed for maximum impact. Sea spray misted Alain's face, sticky over the layer of perspiration on his skin and the long hours in the sun without food. All he'd had today was the granola bar he'd swiped from the kitchen, which of course turned out to be chocolate with his shitty luck. Oh well.

"I see you've been training hard today even with Korrina away," Gurkinn greeted. "How is it coming?"

Alain put a hand on Mega Charizard's flank, a silent order to take a

break, and the two of them turned to face the wrinkled old man with his bushy eyebrows and long mustachios. "Fine, I guess."

Gurkinn wore plain clothes today, a grey windbreaker and loose cotton pants. It was strange seeing him in anything other than his usual traditional garb. He even had his hands in his pockets, casual like spritely old retiree out to admire the seascape and maybe throw back a couple cold ones. "Hm, but something's not quite right, is it?"

Alain was sometimes pretty sure Gurkinn was a wizard with how well he could read people. Not all old people were like that, no way. At this point, he'd learned not to dodge Gurkinn's perspicacity. Doing so would only make an idiot out of one of them, and it was never the old man.

"Actually, there is something," he admitted.

Gurkinn politely waited for him to elaborate.

"It's about Korrina. I sort of...saw something I shouldn't have."

Shit, that came out wrong.

"I-I mean, she was solo training."

Gurkinn smiled a little. "I understand your meaning, Alain."

God, he was a twenty-seven-year-old man and Gurkinn could still make him feel like a pubescent teenager caught sneaking out past his curfew to meet girls or go drinking. An absolutely dreadful image of himself sneaking to Korrina's room and Gurkinn looming over him like some grim reaper going around castrating virgin teenaged boys made him flush with embarrassment, and he swallowed hard to push the inane fantasy out of his mind.

"What I'm trying to say really ineloquently is... Did something happen to Korrina? I mean, something that's stayed with her."

Gurkinn considered him a moment. "Why do you ask?"

Alain rubbed the back of his neck, registering how filthy he was. The sand was everywhere, and he was covered in a thick film of dried sweat and salt. "She just seems so," he paused, searching for the right words, "lost. And angry, but at herself. I mean, she gets pretty steamed at me, but it's not the same."

Gurkinn said nothing as Alain collected his thoughts.

"I look at her sometimes, and I just feel like she's drifting somewhere far away. Like she's lost, and she doesn't want to be found."

Gurkinn approached him. If he'd reached out to pat Alain's shoulder like a father might his son, he could have. But he kept his hands in his pockets. "If I remember correctly, you came to us feeling much the same way."

"What? No, that's..."

Different.

It was different. He was different. His demons weren't hers.

"Korrina is not lost, but she is drifting, just as we all drift in search of something. Some of us just haven't found it yet. And sometimes, we may not recognize what we were searching for all along even when we do find it."

Alain was too hungry and tired for riddles. "What're you saying?"

Gurkinn smiled knowingly. "If you want to know about Korrina, I suggest you ask her."

Before he could stop himself, Alain snorted. "Yeah, right."

"Why does it seem so incredible that she might tell you about herself?"

Alain shifted his weight, suddenly feeling the chill of the sea spray. "Because...I wouldn't tell her about me if she asked. And she wouldn't ask, anyway."

Gurkinn nodded. "I see. Well then, there is your answer."

"You must think I'm pretty pathetic like this."

"Not at all." This time, he did reach out and laid a hand on Alain's shoulder, his grip surprisingly firm for someone so old and frail. "I think you're no different from Korrina or anyone else here. The sooner you realize that, the sooner you'll find what you came here looking for."

Mega Charizard lowered its head next to Alain and growled softly. The blue fire tongues that escaped from the sides of its mouth didn't burn him, but they emanated a pleasant warmth. The sun was dipping low

in the sky, and Alain's stomach took that time to grumble. Gurkinn laughed.

"Come inside, Alain. Korrina and I purchased food in the city from my favorite restaurant. There is plenty."

"Yeah, okay. Thanks."

Mega Charizard released the connection between them and reverted back to its usual orange self. Alain tailed Gurkinn back to the Tower of Mastery and promptly headed to his room for a shower. He changed into jeans, flip-flops, and a violet T-shirt that fit him snugly, feeling refreshed. By the time he got to the kitchen, only Gurkinn was there with a cup of after dinner tea and reading a newspaper. He gestured to the cartons of food on the table when Alain appeared, and Alain was happy to help himself.

In about fifteen minutes, he'd filled his belly and probably replenished all the calories he'd burned off today. Not to worry, he thought, Korrina would beat them out of him tomorrow, surely. And he was looking much better now, besides. He filled out his clothes in all the right places. The flab in his belly had virtually disappeared, and the ripple of toned muscles protruded through his skin in his abdomen, his arms and shoulders, his legs. The itch he'd felt for a drink in the mornings was gone. To say he felt like his old self again would not have been accurate; rather, he felt like a new person entirely. Reborn, if he was feeling corny. But in a way, there was no better word for it.

She did this.

Alain had gone through the motions, but it had been Korrina to work him every day, to push him to his limits and convince him he could do better. She hadn't asked for this. She'd even been against bringing him in. But now, after months under her expert tutelage, he was better than he'd ever been. Alain set down his fork and a half-eaten dumpling stuck to the tines. Gurkinn looked up from his paper.

"Something on your mind?" he asked.

Alain got up from his chair and wiped his mouth with a napkin. He retrieved his plates to take to the kitchen sink. "Yeah, there is."

Gurkinn watched him clean up his dishes and stack them in the drainer, and then return to the table to gather up the cartons. "Leave them. I'll take care of it."

"It's no trouble."

Gurkinn smiled. "Please, I insist."

Alain rubbed the back of his neck where his hair was still a little damp from the shower. "Okay, thanks."

"Korrina is on the porch. If you were wondering."

Alain looked up, but the old man was already back to his newspaper and tea, oblivious.

Definitely a wizard.

But now that he knew where Korrina was, his feet carried him downstairs on autopilot. She hadn't said a word to him since he'd found her training with Mega Lucario, and he'd given her some space knowing her temper. Gurkinn's words to him this afternoon echoed in his head all evening as he mulled over them. He had an inkling of what the old man meant, but going through with it somehow seemed even more daunting than the grueling training Alain got up at dawn every day to endure. This kind of thing... People, their emotions, the boundaries between everyone? It was never his thing.

"*You did this."*

Mairin's accusatory whisper still rang clear in his mind as the day she'd said it. He would never forget her round face, those brown eyes red and puffy from crying. There are moments when children are thrust headlong into the ugly reality of the world and they lose a part of what makes them children to it, stripped away like flesh under a knife. Everybody grew up. Some, like Alain, were eager to take up the knife themselves and flay off the layers of innocence and wonder that armored all children just to have a fighting chance in the world. And some even came out stronger, at least for a little while.

Until the adrenaline wore off, there was nowhere left to run, and all that was left was the pain, raw and red and rotten, a stench that followed him everywhere he went. Vanither. Deserter. *Titan.* It was always the same story everywhere he went, even with Mairin in the end. He couldn't do anything for her but make her cry.

And honestly, what the fuck was he doing here? He was standing at the open door to the porch where Korrina was reclining in one of the wooden sunning chairs, her long blonde hair loose around her shoulders and a beer in her hand as she lounged under the stars and

the few grey clouds in the night sky. What was he going to say to her? Because he'd said it all before. And even the ones who'd tried to understand, who had done their best to give him all the chances in the world were behind him now. Sycamore had taken him in, fed and clothed and educated him when he didn't have to. Gave him a purpose and the means to start over. Serena, the little Magus that had grown up long before even Alain had and somehow found a little bit of joy left in her heart to share with him, had looked up to him like the brother she never had. And now where were they? Probably better off without him, just like Mairin was better off without him.

And yet, here he was hovering in Korrina's door on the cusp of drawing the knife all over again and peeling away what little was left. Gurkinn was so sure like only the very old can be sure because they've seen it all before. The wisdom of senescence was lost on Alain, though, and all he had going for him was the way Korrina looked when she laughed and the raw ache he felt when she stopped. Well, that was more than he'd had before. So he took a chance.

"Korrina," he said, walking outside to stand next to her chair.

She took a sip from the brown glass beer bottle in her lap but didn't look at him. She was focused on the sky overhead. "What do you want, Alain?"

She sounded tired, but not from sleep. He discreetly eyed her stomach, which was covered by a white linen shirt over rolled up blue jeans, and wondered if she was bruised from her fight with Mega Lucario. He didn't realize how long he'd just stood there watching her, lost in thought, until she spoke again.

"Well?" She was looking at him now, that glint of irritation in her eyes he was all too familiar with. "I came out here to relax, so if you're just gonna hover over me, then I'd rather you left."

Alain ran a hand through his hair. "I was just thinking about you and Mega Lucario."

Korrina tapped her fingers lightly over the neck of her beer bottle. "I thought I made it clear that that's none of your business."

"You're right, it's not. And that's why I came out here." He paused as his stomach churned up his dinner. "I just wanted to say I'm sorry. For walking in on you and then asking all those questions. It freaked me out a little, I'm not gonna lie about that. But I didn't mean to corner you like I did. I just... I was just worried."

"You were worried," she said flatly.

"Yeah, is that so hard to believe? I'm not a heartless asshole."

She said nothing to that, and he figured that was as good as he was going to get with her. Whatever. He turned to leave, and she sat up in her chair.

"Is that the truth?" she said.

"Do you really have to ask me that after all this time?"

When she didn't answer him right away, he snorted and slid open the glass door.

"Alain, hey wait."

Korrina got up, empty beer bottle in hand, and set it on top of the mini fridge next to the door. Then she opened up the fridge and retrieved two fresh beers.

"I'm not very good at this," she said, watching him. "People, I mean...it's not just you."

"Coulda fooled me. You're so chummy with all the Gym trainers."

She averted her gaze. "That's different."

Gurkinn's words returned to Alain then, and he found himself wondering if it really was different. If they were all that different.

"And anyway, it's not the point. You're a Titan, and you showed up here with a black Mega Charizard out of the blue asking about Mega Evolution. That kind of first impression hasn't worked out so well in the past with us."

He didn't give her an inch and just stared. Korrina held out one of the beer bottles to him, lips pressed in a thin line as she did her best to reel in whatever beast had come alive inside.

"Apology accepted," she said. "So...can we call a truce?"

He hadn't had any hard liquor since he arrived here, and after that it was only ever a glass of wine at dinner sometimes. He almost had a mind to refuse, but the way she was looking at him...

He accepted the bottle. "There's no need for a truce when we weren't

fighting."

He looked at the open door, debating what to do, but she made the decision for him.

"You can stay out here if you want. I mean, you don't have to, but there's plenty of room."

"I thought you wanted to relax?"

She shrugged. "I've got my beer and miles of ocean to admire. I'd say that's all you really need."

She headed back to her chair, and after a moment's hesitation, Alain followed and leaned back in the one to her left. The beer was cold and a little bitter, and it went down smooth. There was something about a cold beer on the beach, the salt in the air and on the back of your tongue, the heat rising from the sand, that could take the sting off whatever bullshit kind of day you'd had. The ocean waves had a soporific effect, and the cool night air was just right. Far in the distance, the stars and moon shone down on the seascape and illuminated red, glassy lumps far out to sea—Tentacruel and Tentacool, come to the surface to hunt and feed. He couldn't imagine what it must have been like to grow up in such a beautiful place, so tranquil and relaxing.

"You know," Alain breached the comfortable silence, "I was meaning to ask you."

"Hm?"

"Do you still think I'm like all the other Titans?"

She eyed him askance, cradling her beer protectively. "I think none of us can escape what's in our nature."

"So you think I'm a liar and a megalomaniac."

Korrina opened her mouth to say something, then thought better of it. Alain shook his head.

"Look, I'm not blaming you. I told you that first night that I agreed with you. All Titans are the same."

"Then why bring it up?"

"Because I'm asking if after all this time, maybe you see me, like, as a

person, a little differently. Maybe I'm not as bad as you think."

Korrina sat up in her chair. "Hold on a minute. You're the one agreeing that they're all the same. And now you're asking me to believe that somehow you're a special snowflake who's so far above all that? I like you Alain, and I'll admit I wasn't fair to judge you like I did, even if I thought I was just being cautious."

"Wait, what?"

Korrina kept talking without giving him a moment to question her. "But when you've got people like Lance of Blackthorn going all crazy terrorist on everyone, it's a *little* hard to believe you're above all that. That guy was one of the best, right? And look what happened to him. What am I supposed to think about you or all the other Titans that aren't even the same kind of prodigy he was?"

"Hey, I'm not going to hold the world hostage or shoot up an elementary school, okay? What the fuck."

"I didn't say you were, but face it: Tamers are all the same. I can't escape being a Bellatrix any more than you can escape what you are. There's good and bad. It's been what, almost five months now? And you still never told us who you really are, where you came from, why you're on your own even though we gave you every opportunity when you got here. So yeah, I do think Titans are all the same, even you."

They sat in silence for a few moments, stewing. Alain swirled his half-drunk beer, for the first time at a total loss for words around Korrina. They weren't even in the ring, and she could still floor him.

She was staring out to sea, frowning lightly. Her chair was only a couple feet from him, but he got the eerie sensation that if he tried to touch her, he would never reach her, as though invisible currents carried her farther and farther away, adrift on a sea of silence that would drown out any call for help. He was there, too, had been for the better part of a year.

No, for most of his life. Ever since he left the Dragon clan that had sired and reared him, he'd been wandering, lost and without direction, searching for something and continuously failing to find it. Gurkinn had promised him he would find it if he listened, if he gave it time. What the fuck did that mean? All he'd done here was get his ass kicked and learned a few moves of his own on the way.

You ungrateful little ass wipe, a small voice chided him in the back of

his mind.

Alain clutched the beer in his hand, cold to the touch and wet with condensation. God, was he really that selfish? Was that what Mairin had seen in him when she tearfully turned her back on him and saddled him with enough guilt to drown him in the bottom of a bottle?

He didn't know what Korrina's deal was, even now, and he was pretty sure she wasn't going to open up to him out of the blue. And maybe it was wishful thinking, or maybe he secretly wanted to hurt her. Probably a little of both, because contrary to what he was about to do, deep down Alain agreed with her. We cannot escape our natures, and the past will always follow us no matter where we run. All we can do is face it and accept it for what it is, and then work hard every day to rise above it. Gurkinn had warned him that he would never find his way until he was strong enough to face what he'd left behind. So be it.

"You're right," Alain said, his voice hoarse. "We're all the same. And no matter what I do, I'll always be one of them, for better and for worse." He thought of Goodra, how he'd bent the slug Dragon's will to his own ends. The Dragonsblood in his veins had saved his life and Korrina's, the inheritance that he'd tried his best to throw away and forget the day he left the Apep Dynasty. "And that's why I'll accept whatever you think of me after I tell you everything."

He had Korrina's attention now. She was looking right at him with those darkly viridian eyes glassy in the starlight, her blonde hair in her face and around her neck and fluttering in the light breeze, and still he wouldn't reach her if he tried, if he wanted to. But maybe she would listen, as Goodra had listened, as Gurkinn had implored him to listen if he was ever going find something worth holding onto.

"I was born in Dendemille Town to a proud Titan couple. Proud, because it soon became obvious that I could exert control. I had the Old Blood, just like them, and as far as the clan was concerned, their duty as parents was fulfilled. The day I tested positively, the Elder selected me to be part of Generation Theta, the newest batch of Titans in training, everyone up to ten years of age who'd manifested the Dragonsblood. It was a week after my fifth birthday that they came for me, for the training. I didn't see my dad again for the next seven years."

Alain took a long swig of his beer, which was getting warm now and almost finished. He dared not look at Korrina, instead staring out to

sea. The Tentacruel and Tentacool bobbed in groups of fifty or more, and every once in a while he could detect frantic splashing on the otherwise placid sea—ensnared prey that would be Poison Stung to death then ripped in to with serrated beaks until not even the bones were left. Korrina said nothing, but he could hear her breathing in time with the crashing waves below. Steady, constant.

He told her about the training, which was ostensibly to teach the youngsters the secrets of their powers and weed out the mediocre from the truly talented. But mixed in with the regular practice and lectures, the mentors under the Elder's direction employed experimental protocols meant to test the limits of the kids' control. Alain told Korrina about how in one such experiment, the mentors divided the group in half, six control and six experimental, and starved one group for three days. Then they would pit one control and one experimental against each other in a race against time and mortality: the first to successfully navigate a predetermined path through the Frost Mountains to the north and coerce one of the wild Pokémon there to protect him or her along the way would win.

Those mountains were home to a slew of dreaded Ice-type Pokémon, as well as several Dragons and Dragon descendants. The kids started the test without any Pokémon as per the rules—they were meant to find a new one. The point of the experiment was to determine whether the lack of food and isolation from the rest of the group for a limited amount of time beforehand would affect the kids' ability to control a Dragon. Alain had been part of the starved group.

"I was nine at the time. They'd trained us in survival tactics, and the path was meant to be completed in a day and a night. All I wanted was to find food, but without Charmander, I knew I was vulnerable. So while the other kid ran ahead into Frost Cavern, I stayed behind in the mountains. That's where I found Tyrantrum. Well, he was a Tyrunt back then. Long story short, I managed to coerce Tyrunt to stick with me. That worked out well enough, and it even brought me a leg of Sawsbuck its littermates had been feasting on. Then the mom showed up. I remember being too scared even to piss my pants. I've never run so fast since, well, since that Goodra in the mines.

"Tyrunt came with me, but I could tell he didn't want to. He wanted to stay with his mother, but I needed him to help me. I think that was one of the lessons of that particular exercise. Know who's boss, who's in control. Even if you sympathize, the boss comes first. The boss always comes first." Alain downed the rest of his beer. "Tyrunt's the reason I made it out alive. They never found the kid I was racing. And

I remember the first thought that popped into my mind when they told me that. I thought, 'Good, that means I won'. Nine fucking years old."

He lapsed into silence, inundated with memories he thought he'd never revisit again. If he thought about it hard enough, he could remember the biting cold of Frost Cavern through his jacket and even the taste of that Sawsbuck leg. He had to eat it raw and share it with Tyrunt since Charmander wasn't with him to make a fire, and he wouldn't have made a fire anyway with all the feral Pokémon it would have attracted. He even remembered that Tyrunt curled up next to him, its oversized head in his lap, shivering. He waited until the little dinosaur was asleep before he cried. It was the longest night of his life.

Korrina got up without a word while he lost himself in the sands of time. She went to the mini fridge and brought back two more beers for them, and handed one to him wordlessly. He accepted it without really thinking. It was cold and crisp going down, and it brought him back to the present.

Right. The story.

His life.

He started again. He told her that by the time he was twelve and the seven-year training was completed, two thirds of Generation Theta had been culled. Some had succumbed to the elements during survival training, like the kid Alain had raced through Frost Cavern. Others lost control of their Dragons, and their Pokémon turned on them. Some were deemed too diluted of blood to continue, and the mentors took them by the hand one day and they never came back. Alain had survived, and for his trouble he was declared a Titan for true, and one day it would be his turn to "mentor" the new generation.

His mother would have been proud if she'd still been alive. Sadly, she'd succumbed to a bout of pneumonia and died within days of infection when Alain was eleven, just a year before his return home. His father, accordingly, didn't offer him the welcome back Alain expected, too far drowned in a bottle of Jack to even notice that he still had a son and that son was back.

"You know why Titans lie?" Alain said. By now he was sitting up, feet on the porch and leaning over his knees, dangling his beer bottle in between them. He still didn't look at Korrina, lost in the mists of

memory. "We lie because it's a form of control. If you can impose your reality on others, then all of a sudden you're their god. You decide their fate, like I decided Goodra's fate. The people I grew up with... All they know is control—the need for it, the pull of it in others, and the lies we all told to keep it at bay. When you're taught from day one that control is the pinnacle of everything you can ever achieve, you'll do anything to get it. Because if you don't, the kid next to you will, and you'll end up trampled, forgotten, like the kid who never came back from the Frost Cavern. We try to exert control over others because we know they'll lie to escape it if we don't. I guess it's kind of funny when you think about it that way. Lying to maintain control, and controlling to keep the liars in line. The only thing Dragons hate more than those who stand against them are their own kind. Titans are the same way. We're our own worst enemies."

"But you left." It was the first thing Korrina said since he'd started.

He looked up at her, but she was as steady as ever, maybe more so. Impartial. She was good at that, Korrina. She knew how to keep a straight face and hold her tongue when others were suffering and vulnerable to judgment. It might have been one of her best qualities, now that he thought about it.

"Yeah, I left. My father drank himself into an early grave. I used his death as an excuse to get out of my duties for a couple days. Mourning and all. I packed a bag and left as soon as the funeral goers cleared out and didn't look back.

"I was almost fourteen then. I wandered all over eastern Kalos for about two months, just me and Charmander and Tyrunt. Well, you know how it is for vanithers like me. It wasn't a very...social time in my life. I met plenty of people, just not the right side of them." He spoke quickly, not wanting to give her any room to jump in if she felt so inclined. "No one came after me. Which seemed really weird to me back then. All that time invested in making me a real Titan, and the second I bolt they don't even make an effort? Now I know better. They wouldn't want anyone they couldn't control. And, well, we're back to square one."

He sipped his beer and spared Korrina a glance, but she was looking at an indistinct point on his chest, lost in thought.

"Then I met a young Ph.D. candidate in Lumiose City. He was in his last year of study when we crossed paths, and he had a pretty cushy gig lined up at a lab in the city. He found out what I was and for some

weird reason took pity on me. I ended up working as a lab tech for him, and he started teaching me whatever struck his fancy. I knew a lot about Pokémon—that is, about how to control them. And about how to kill them. I knew how to hunt wild Avalugg, how to approach a Garchomp on a rampage and live through it, that window of opportunity when you could sneak up on a school of Dragalge and steal the Skrelp eggs to raise them tame.

"But this professor, he taught me things I never even considered. Charizard's tail, for example. I never realized how much energy they expend to keep it lit, and if it goes out, they can die. He taught me what to do in case I ever got in trouble with that, and it came in handy when Charizard was still a Charmeleon and we were doing fieldwork in the White Mountains east of Vaniville Town. He would've died if I hadn't known what to do. Stuff like that. And it got me thinking about what else was out there that I didn't know.

"Eventually, I got to the point where I needed to set out on my own again, after ten years in Lumiose. I was a vanither, but I was educated and I knew there was a whole world out there beyond what I grew up believing. That was when I met him."

"Him?" Korrina said.

"...Lysandre. Remember when I said I had a mentor who taught me about Mega Evolution?"

Alain went on to recount his time working directly for Lysandre, who operated a conglomerate known informally as Team Flare. She'd never heard of it, and he wasn't surprised. They kept their operations discreet and diversified, but their R&D division was cutting edge, unlike anything Alain had ever seen. When Lysandre told him about Mega Evolution and how to attain it, that had been the hook, line, and sinker that cost Alain nearly four years of his life.

"There are things in this world," he said softly, "things I can't explain. Monsters like you wouldn't believe. That story about Champion Lance reviving a sea monster? I believe it. I believe it because I saw my own monsters in Hoenn. That kind of power... It wasn't meant for humans to control. I could feel it like I was gonna explode.

"But Lysandre didn't share my reservations, even after what we'd seen. Steven Stone tried to make him see reason, but even he couldn't get through to Lysandre and ultimately broke the tenuous partnership he had with Team Flare for that specific project."

"Steven Stone... The Champion of Hoenn? You met him?"

Alain grunted. "I met him, all right. Most days I wish I hadn't. That guy could break you in half with a look if he wanted to. Let's just say he's not a fan of Titans."

"But he worked with you."

Korrina's unspoken question hung in the air between them, and Alain sipped his beer.

"Yeah, maybe. I dunno. He mentioned he'd met one Titan he trusted, some girl from Kanto. That was the extent of the bonding, I assure you."

"What happened with Lysandre afterwards?"

Alain wiped his nose. "Lysandre and I had...creative differences, let's say. He was obsessed with harnessing the power of Mega Evolution. He's a skuff, so he can't use it himself. I got the sense that he wanted to change that."

"That's impossible," Korrina said. "Only Tamers can use Mega Evolution."

"I know. But in Hoenn, Steven and I found this huge monolith. It was what those monsters were fighting over, some giant crystal. Lysandre called it a Mega Stone, I don't know. He brought it back to Lumiose City, to his lab. Maybe he thought it would solve his problem. But I left before anything happened with it."

Korrina had gone eerily still. "Mega Stone?"

"Yeah. What?"

"Nothing, sorry. What happened then?"

Alain frowned but didn't press the subject. He shifted. "Remember I told you I hurt someone I cared about? Her name was Mairin, and she'd kind of tagged along with me to Hoenn for this whole shit show."

He recounted a little of his travels with Mairin, how she'd found him one day out of the blue and named herself his sidekick, like they were masked vigilantes fighting crime or something equally as ludicrous. Mairin herself was a little bit ludicrous, he supposed. Like all children,

she didn't really understand that there was no such thing as heroes, that monsters usually won, and that sometimes the people you depend on the most never find their courage, and instead they run away, never looking back.

"Mairin," Korrina said. "You...broke her heart?"

"You know, I guess I must have for her to turn on me like that. I don't even really know how it happened. I got so caught up in getting stronger, in mastering Mega Evolution, in escaping my Titan heritage and doing something that was just mine, something for me, something they couldn't take credit for. And Mairin just... She was collateral. I didn't even realize what I was doing until it was already too late. Her Chespin was dying. He's probably long dead by now." He rubbed his eyes. "I've done some shitty things in my time, but ruining a kid's life has got to be the worst."

Korrina blinked. "Wait, she's just a kid?"

"Yeah, like thirteen or something." He dug his fingers into his hair. "I can't stop hearing her voice. Every time I close my eyes, she's there, crying. I don't know how to fix it."

He took a shaky breath and closed his eyes.

"So I ran. I ran for months. It's the only thing I know I'm good at." He looked up, eyelids heavy and the beer going to his head a little. "And now I'm here, with you. Getting my ass kicked every day and wondering when I'll finally just..."

Korrina was seated opposite him, so absorbed in his story and leaning forward over her knees. For a moment of insanity, he wondered if he really could reach her now, if he tried.

"Just what?" she asked.

"Just..." He trailed off and studied her face. If he just reached out... "Just find something I don't want to run away from."

Korrina held his gaze, turbulent jade almost black under the starlight. He tried to remember how she'd looked in the throes of laughter when they were in the swamp together, but it was getting harder and harder. Lost at sea, floating in the doldrums of solitude and wanting, but for what he couldn't say. And she'd already done enough for him, he reminded himself as his eyes fell to that scar on her lip that was so her, the evidence that she was a fighter, a survivor. She leaned

forward, her hand wandering like she didn't know the way, closer.

"Korrina, Alain," Gurkinn called from the porch door. "I'm heading to bed. I wanted to wish you both goodnight."

Alain jumped in surprise. He hadn't even heard the old man approach! Korrina pulled back abruptly, equally caught off guard, and stood up.

"Okay, Grandpa. Is there anything left to clean up?" she said.

"No, my dear. I've already taken care of it."

"Okay, thanks. I'll head to bed soon, too."

Gurkinn nodded and shifted his gaze to Alain. "Goodnight, Alain. I'll see you in the morning."

"Uh, yeah, goodnight sir."

Gurkinn smiled at them, stretching the many wrinkles around his eyes, and slid the glass door closed behind him. Korrina stretched briefly, then gathered up the empty bottles.

"I got this, you can head up if you want," she said.

Alain stood up and stretched out his arms. The night air had grown a little cooler since he'd been out here, but it felt nice on his flushed face. It had been a long time since he'd told anyone what he told Korrina tonight about his childhood, not since Sycamore. His mind was fuzzy, maybe courtesy of the beers and the misty memories revisited after so long relegated to the dungeon of his mind.

"Korrina," he said as she slid the glass door open to deposit the empty bottles in a bin inside.

She watched him from the doorway. Gone was the guarded, tight-lipped nonchalance he'd long ago learned was a bolted door to her temper. She looked at him like she'd known him all her life, and this meeting was their homecoming after so long apart. Wistful, a small, secret smile that stretched the little scar on her upper lip, dark eyes steady. Always steady.

"Thank you," she said, "for trusting me. I only wish I'd given you reason to sooner."

His throat was dry from all the talking, and he found he couldn't respond to her. But like her mind-reading grandfather, Korrina peered

into his soul and smiled like she almost never smiled, and he no longer needed the words.

"Goodnight, Alain."

He watched her go, his feet too heavy to move, and soon she was gone. Alain stuffed his hands in his pockets.

"Goodnight, Korrina."

Dinner at Serena's was a quiet affair. Calem had known Grace since he was a kid once Serena started coming to Sycamore's lab. She was pleasant enough, probably more for Serena's sake than his. Her daughter wasn't the social type, so Grace had welcomed the idea of a friend for her only daughter. Grace volunteered little this evening, so Calem asked her about her charity races. She was happy to recount a little of what she was doing, but she didn't ask him much beyond the usual—how's your family, are you enjoying your work at Sycamore's lab, and any plans for the future?

"Actually, I've been thinking a lot about traveling to Hoenn," Calem said. "I'd love to meet Steven Stone if I had the chance. Maybe even train under him."

"Steven Stone? Who's that?" Grace asked, sipping her wine.

"Calem's hero," Serena said. "Ever since we were kids."

"Aw, when you put it like that it makes me sound like some creepy fanboy," Calem teased.

Grace looked between the two of them. "I'm sorry, I still don't follow. Is he a celebrity?"

Serena held Calem's gaze, and he hesitated before saying, "Sort of. He's the Champion of Hoenn."

The table fell silent. Grace set down her glass of wine.

"Oh. So he's a Tamer, I take it," Grace said.

Calem hid a wince by wiping his mouth with a napkin. "Yeah, he is."

"He's a Steel Adamantine, just like Calem," Serena said softly. "He's the best there is."

Grace scooped up some of her remaining food with a fork and chewed quietly. Calem felt like disintegrating. Somehow, Grace's silence felt like a slap in the face. But he couldn't hold it against her. Serena had explained it to him many times over the years. Plebs like Grace didn't understand what it was like to be different, and Grace was doing her best considering one day her normal little girl wandered out of the woods transformed into something beyond her comprehension. She hadn't asked for it. She really didn't even deserve it. But she was doing her best.

Calem's mother was also a pleb, but she'd always been supportive and enthusiastic about her son's nature. She'd married a Tamer, after all, and she knew her children would inherit her husband's Tamer blood over her lack thereof. It was always the way with unions between Tamers and plebs. Grace, on the other hand, was on her own.

"I appreciate you putting me up for the night," Calem said. "I know I came down a day early unannounced, so thanks for being so accommodating."

"It's no trouble," Grace said.

After dinner, Calem helped Serena pack for her next extended stay in Lumiose City. Sylveon kept giving him the evil eye the entire time he was within ten feet of it.

"So Sylveon still hates me," he said as he folded a shirt and laid it neatly in Serena's bag.

Serena sighed. "Sylveon doesn't hate you. He's just not used to you because you're a Steel Adamantine. We've talked about this."

"Klefki likes me just fine."

Klefki jingled upon hearing its name and floated in a circle around Calem's head.

"Klefki's also a Steel-type *and* he spends half his time with you," Serena pointed out.

"Sylveon was fine with me when he was still an Eevee."

Serena packed some socks and a pair of pants, then sat down on the bed next to Calem. "Well, *I* like you. Does that count?"

She smiled, and he didn't fight the urge to take her hand.

"Yeah," he said softly. "I like you, too."

"You're my best friend. I *hope* you like me, weirdo."

She got up again and Sylveon jumped off the bed to follow. Calem stuck his tongue out at the finicky feline when it wasn't looking, feeling marginally better.

"I guess we'll always kind of be at odds," Serena said. Her back was turned and she was looking out her window at the dark woods.

Calem got up and stood just behind her, but he didn't touch her. "We're not at odds."

"You know what I mean."

He watched their reflections in the windowpane. She was right there, and it would have been so easy, so natural to wrap his arms around her and promise her the world, whatever she wanted. But Serena's gaze was far away, somewhere deep in those dark woods in a lovely place only she remembered. She'd told him what happened, how she'd encountered Xerneas in those woods, and to this day he didn't quite believe her.

When people die, they stay dead. But what did he know? He wasn't blessed by a Fairy, the essence of Life itself. All he really knew was that it didn't matter. Serena was here, she was real, and he wouldn't trade that for anything. Calem raised his arms to wrap them around her waist, but Serena stepped to the side just then and headed for the closet.

"Anyway, I've just got a couple more things. Guess I should've done this sooner," she said.

Calem stuffed his hands in his pockets. Sylveon was sitting on its haunches and peering up at him with those luminous, blue eyes.

"What're you looking at?" Calem said.

Sylveon held his gaze, unblinking, and he got a strange chill, like it could read his mind and dared him to give it a reason to act on whatever murderous instincts Calem suspected it had always harbored for anyone who wasn't Serena. ...Or maybe he was being a little dramatic.

"Did you say something?" Serena called from her closet.

"No, nothing."

Sylveon trotted off to join Serena in the closet. Once she was packed and ready to go, Calem settled into the guest room on the first floor and helped himself to the shower. It was late, and he'd had a long day of flying from Lumiose on his Staraptor. Serena bid him goodnight, and they both decided to get a good night's sleep before heading out first thing in the morning. Grace would not be joining them.

Calem lay in bed, Klefki settled on the pillow next to him and totally passed out from its exciting day. He considered recalling it to its Pokéball, but decided against it. The little Keychain Pokémon seemed to like being outside, even when it was dead tired. Aegislash sat propped against the wall by the door, its black ribbons wrapped around its shield to keep it in place. To the untrained eye, it appeared as an antique knight's broadsword and shield, nothing particularly special about it.

As he lay in bed, Calem resolved to have a real conversation with Serena about his feelings for her. He couldn't keep lying to himself or to her, at least not without knowing where she stood on the matter. Maybe it wasn't fair to throw this in her face, but it wasn't fair to have to swallow it every day and pretend like nothing was amiss. If she didn't feel the same way, then that would be a huge bummer, but he'd respect her wishes and deal with it. He could not keep up the charade for much longer either way or he would probably spontaneously combust one of these days. But how to broach the subject? What could he say? When was the best time?

His thoughts muddled and spilled over into his dreams as sleep slowly overtook him. He dreamed of confessing everything to Serena, and she stared through him like he wasn't there at all. And when he tried to take her hand, Altaria descended from the heavens and knocked him down, tore open his belly with its wicked beak, and began to feast on his innards.

"*We'll always be at odds,"* Dream Serena said as she looked down on him slowly being eaten alive.

Except it was no longer Altaria tearing him apart from the inside out, but Alain, his fingers long and curved into talons and his incisors as long as his chin. Blue Dragonfire bled from his eyes as he lowered his face to Calem's and grinned.

"*Keep dreaming, kid,"* he taunted Calem, digging his talons in deeper

and spilling blood, red ribbons that looped around Alain's shoulders like demon wings, those heartstrings that Serena admired so much.

Serena screamed, and Calem could do nothing but reach for her in vain. It was so loud and piercing, so full of anguish, so *real*...

Calem jerked awake in a cold sweat and tore at his T-shirt, making sure his intestines weren't spilling out over the bed. He was intact, the phantom pain all but gone, and Serena's scream rang in his ear. Klefki stirred on the pillow, jingling.

"Just a dream," Calem whispered, breathing heavily.

Klefki floated in front of his face and jingled noisily.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

Klefki wiggled frantically and floated toward the door, where it jingled some more over Aegislash. The Ghost's jeweled eye flickered to life and swiveled around the room. Something hit the floor with a low *thud* somewhere on the second floor, and Calem froze.

"That wasn't a dream."

Serena.

Calem launched out of bed and grabbed the Pokéballs on the nightstand. He was in nothing but one of his dad's old sports T-shirts and boxers, but he didn't give his appearance a second thought as he threw open the door to his room and ran to the stairs. Aegislash zoomed after him, leaving a thin trail of violet fog in its wake, and Klefki lagged behind, unable to keep up.

Calem took the stairs two at a time, overstepped near the top, and fell flat on his face. He swore as his right knee exploded with pain, but it would pass. Aegislash hovered near the bottom of the stairs, suddenly frozen in its place.

"What're you doing? C'mon!" Calem called to it as he hauled himself up.

Aegislash's eye swiveled, seeing into dimensions beyond Calem's understanding, and he got the strange feeling that it was...afraid.

"What's going on with you? I need you, Aegislash!"

Reluctantly, the sentient sword and shield floated up the stairs as

Calem righted himself. Grace threw open her door just then at the end of the hall, wrapped in a bathrobe with her hair a bit frazzled.

"What's going on out here?" she demanded, words slurred from sleep.

Aegislash caught up to Calem, and he jogged through the pain in his knee down the opposite end of the hall to Serena's room.

"I don't know, I heard something," he called back to Grace.

Klefki chimed furiously near the top of the stairs where Calem had left it, rattling uncontrollably. Calem threw open Serena's door without knocking and burst inside. The room was dark, the comforter was splayed on the floor, and the window was wide open. The bedside lamp had fallen off the nightstand and shattered, most likely the thump Calem had heard downstairs.

There was no sign of Serena anywhere.

"Shit."

Calem ran to the window and looked outside. What he saw below in the backyard garden made his blood run cold. Serena was there, fully dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt like she'd planned to sneak out, but her plans had been thwarted by the other figure standing over her comatose body. A woman in black and red with loud, magenta hair loomed over Serena. A Delphox stood at her side, its torch glowing with Mystical Fire that looped around Serena and made her convulse, sending her into a telepathically induced coma.

"Hey!" Calem shouted as he climbed out the window.

The woman looked up at him—she was wearing sunglasses despite the darkness and the late hour—and smirked. "It's past your bedtime, kid. Nothing to see here."

"Like hell! What'd you do to Serena?!"

Calem was on the roof now, and Aegislash was right behind him. Calem reached for it, and it wrapped its black sash around the length of his right arm to the elbow. Aegislash's shield found its way into his left hand.

"Do?" the woman said. "Not much. But I had the element of surprise. You ruined my silent getaway, by the way."

Grace appeared at the window behind Calem with Klefki in tow. "What's going on?! Where's my daughter?!"

The woman in the backyard headed for the gate. "And that's my cue to leave before this party gets any more popular." She waved to her Delphox. "Bring the Magus."

Calem paled. "Magus?"

How does she know?

Calem had always feared a day like this would come, that the wrong person would find out about Serena, but he'd never dreamed it would happen like this, so soon, and he so unprepared. She must have caught Serena unawares as she was sneaking out to the woods, otherwise Serena surely would have engaged her in battle and raised the alarm. Aegislash's hilt was a comforting weight in his right hand as Calem quickly realized what he would have to do.

"Calem, what's happening?" Grace shouted from the window. "Who's that woman?"

"She's got Serena," Calem said. "And I'm gonna get her back."

The woman had reached the gate and was fiddling with the latch. Her Delphox, undoubtedly the powerful Psychic that had spooked Aegislash earlier, carried Serena's unconscious body via telekinesis behind it, and just the sight of them carting Serena off like chattel filled Calem's belly with an acidic desire to hurt them.

"Stay there, Grace," Calem said as he ran to the edge of the roof and jumped.

He brandished Aegislash's shield in his left hand over his chest and raised his sword hand. The woman saw him plummeting toward her like a dive-bomber and swore, forcing the garden gate open and spilling out onto the sidewalk just as Calem swung.

Aegislash glowed white as it hit the ground, smashing through the gate and cutting clean through the concrete sidewalk where the woman was backtracking as quickly as she could. The Sacred Sword attack exploded in the ground, sending up a hail of earth, grass, and concrete and completely smashing through the wooden garden gate. Calem landed hard on the ground, Aegislash breaking his fall only a little, and grunted.

"Oh my god, Serena!" Grace shouted, just now noticing Delphox's telepathic hold on her daughter as it attempted to jump the wall.

Grace disappeared into the house in a rush, and Klefki followed her. Calem got to his feet, breathing hard but barely noticing the chill in his nightclothes. Aegislash pulsed in his grip, its gold-encrusted blade singing for the woman's flesh. He was more than happy to oblige it, but first that Delphox.

Calem turned on the Psychic fox, who'd cleared the wall with Serena floating behind it, and lunged at it. "Let her go!"

Aegislash glowed with the beginnings of a Shadow Ball, the purple Ghost mist enveloping its blade, and Calem swung hard at Delphox. Delphox generated a wondrous wall of yellow light just as Calem connected. The Shadow Ball detonated against Delphox's Light Screen and blew them both backwards, Delphox into the garden wall and cracking the stone, and Calem skidding along the sidewalk.

A burning pain erupted in his face, which was already starting to bleed profusely where gravel had ripped open his skin over his temple and cheek, but he struggled to his feet. The rest of him—bare legs, elbows, palms—had escaped unscathed but stung like hell. Focusing on hardening his skin in fifteen places at once proved too difficult. The unfamiliar heat and stickiness of his own blood stung as it leaked into the side of his eye. The woman ran to her Delphox to make sure it was okay, then retrieved something from her hip.

"Listen, kid, I don't know you and I couldn't give less of a fuck who she is to you, but I'll do you a favor and give you the chance to stand down. I promise I won't kill you if you do."

Calem got to his feet and winced at the burning pain in his face. "Fuck you. Let her go or I'll kill *you*."

The woman sighed dramatically, then laughed darkly. "You know? I was kind of hoping you'd say that."

She tossed out two Pokéballs, and from within the light, a female Pyroar and a Talonflame materialized. Pyroar snarled, the orange crest on its head aglow with combusting embers. Talonflame, too small to carry a human rider but as deadly fast as a Crobat, took to the sky with a fiery flap of its wings.

Damn, it had to be Fire types, Calem thought.

But this was Serena. He had to do everything he could and more. This woman, whoever she was, knew Serena was a Magus and was clearly intending to kidnap her for some reason. Nothing good judging from her style and hostility. He had to stop her.

So he reached for his own Pokéballs and released Bisharp and Escavalier, the former to counteract Delphox's Psychic abilities while he and Aegislash dealt with Pyroar, and the latter to counter Talonflame's speed and flight. Bisharp fell into position at Calem's flank, bladed fists poised to rip and maim, while Escavalier hovered off to the side, its steel helmet lowered over its vulnerable eyes and head and sharp stingers brandished like medieval lances.

"Serena!"

Grace appeared on the sidewalk leading around from the front door in her slippers and bathrobe, while Klefki buzzed about Calem's head, frantic at the smell of his blood.

The woman noticed Grace and waved her hand. Pyroar leaped, quick as lightning, toward Grace, its jaws smoking with Fire Fang. Calem reacted on instinct and ran to intercept.

"King's Shield!" he shouted, thrusting the golden shield in his left hand forward.

Aegislash's shield lit up with a golden aura just as Pyroar slammed into it with Fire Fang. Calem wobbled on his bare feet, feeling the bottoms of his feet scrape and peel away over the chewed up sidewalk, but he pushed back with all his might. Pyroar was no match for the ultimate defense, type advantage or no, and it was blown back with a nasty *snap*. Grace froze, eyes wide and mouth agape, just a few feet behind Calem in Pyroar's intended line of fire.

But there was no time. Pyroar hissed, its own attack having backfired and blown up in its face. It bled from its cheeks, its pink gums bloody and a couple teeth cracked, but Calem had really only pissed it off more. Delphox moved to defend the woman, and Talonflame took to the skies, intending to loop around for a Brave Bird attack.

"Bisharp! Night Slash!" Calem shouted.

Bisharp didn't need much prompting. It lunged for Delphox, knife tipped fists raised, and leaked sinister tar that splattered when it slashed. Escavalier didn't even wait for Calem as it played a game of chicken with the speedy Talonflame, its sharp stingers poised and

waiting for the firebird to come to it.

Talonflame swooped, impossibly fast, and kicked up a white-hot tailwind as it powered up a Brave Bird attack. Escavalier braced itself, and Talonflame slammed into it with scything wings. They crashed together, and Escavalier rammed its lance stingers into Talonflame's belly with all its might in a reckless Fell Stinger attack. Talonflame squawked and broke contact, the Brave Bird propelling it onward and ripping Escavalier's stingers out from under it. One had missed, managing only to pull out a few white feathers, but the other punctured a deep, six-inch gash in Talonflame's underbelly. Blood spilled from the weeping wound and splashed the sidewalk and Escavalier, who spun out of control and slammed into the cracked stone garden wall. The impact left a wide, crumbling dent in the wall, and it fell apart around the Cavalry Pokémon, burying it.

Calem witnessed what had happened to Escavalier, but he was too preoccupied with Pyroar and the mysterious woman to help his Pokémon. Grace had backed up a ways with Klefki to Calem's relief, and he ran at Pyroar without worrying about her safety. He let go of Aegislash's hilt, the black ribbons still wrapped around his arm, and the sword flew of its own volition in a downward Guillotine over Pyroar. But the agile lioness dodged with a well-timed Double Team at the last minute, and Aegislash's blade ended up in the ground again, half buried in the dirt and concrete.

Pyroar's long crest glowed as the embers it shed grew hotter and fluttered around its body. The flames began to grow with the beginnings of a deadly Overheat, but Calem jumped straight for her, shield first.

"Eat this!" he yelled.

Aegislash's shield shone with a steely silver sheen as he crashed it into Pyroar's head. The lioness whimpered as she took the Iron Head attack at point-blank range and exploded in falling embers. They burned holes in Calem's clothes and seared his hair and skin—he could keep his skin from cutting and scraping if he concentrated, but he couldn't stop it from boiling off his bones. Calem cried out as he broke from Pyroar and fell back, Aegislash's shield heavy over his chest.

Nearby, Bisharp was pushing Delphox into a corner with Night Slash after Night Slash, forcing it to split its concentration between supporting Serena and fending off Bisharp. Bisharp was fast, and it managed to land a direct hit across Delphox's chest, making the fox

howl in pain as its ruddy fur congealed and darkened with blood. But the small victory was short lived. Delphox spat out a thick Flamethrower and Bisharp was forced to dodge, but Delphox's Psychic abilities manipulated the fire and looped the stream around. Bisharp took off at a run from the sentient fire, skidding over the rubble from the decimated garden wall.

Escavalier finally managed to dig itself out of the rubble just as Bisharp neared it, and Calem blanched at what he knew was about to happen.

"Shit, Bisharp!"

Bisharp got the message loud and clear and took a knee in front of the still-dazed Escavalier. It began to glow with a soft, silvery light as it concentrated its Iron Defense, and not a moment too soon. Delphox's Psychic-enhanced Flamethrower hit it dead center and folded over itself in a spinning conflagration that completely obscured Bisharp from view. Escavalier was safe behind it, struggling to right itself as Calem similarly tried to stand.

A sharp whistling overhead was all the warning Calem got when Talonflame, its breast bloody and its cruel talons outstretched, swooped in out of nowhere and snatched Escavalier from the rubble. It took to the sky, its talons worming their way into the grooves in Escavalier's protective armor, and the Bug struggled to free itself.

"No, Escavalier!"

Calem managed to get up and went for Aegislash's blade. Pyroar was on the ground a ways away, bleeding and smoking and struggling to stand. He had to shoot that Talonflame out of the sky before it ripped Escavalier to shreds.

Something grabbed him by his sword arm, and a white-hot pain bloomed where fingers curled around his skin. Calem screamed and swung around with Aegislash's shield on instinct, but another hand grabbed his shield arm from behind and burned through it, too. He smelled his own flesh cooking under her hands, that woman that had abducted Serena, felt her fingers sinking past his boiling flesh into his muscles and cooking them, too. The pain was too much, and he dropped Aegislash's shield before he could stop himself. Calem struggled, and she pulled him to her.

"Don't say I didn't warn you, kid," the woman said against his ear.

Escavalier shrieked above as Talonflame dug its nails under its steel helmet and ripped it clean off. Calem watched, horrified, as the firebird tore into the supple flesh newly exposed, and severed Escavalier's unprotected head at the neck, swallowing it in one gulp. Then it let the rest of Escavalier's body fall to the ground, where its armor fell apart and it bled a greenish yellow discharge from its severed neck, unmoving.

Delphox's Flamethrower ran its course, and Bisharp emerged from the flames smoking and charred, but in one piece. Iron Defense had saved it, but it hadn't been enough to save Escavalier. Pyroar had finally gotten to its feet and snarled, blue eyes narrowed to slits, as it circled Calem, limping from its wounds.

Tears filled Calem's eyes as the pain washed over him like a wave, like it was the sea and he was drowning in high tide. He couldn't even feel the area where her fingers were digging into him anymore, the nerves burned to a crisp all the way to the bone. The smell of his flash fired flesh stung the back of his throat, sour, and his knees buckled. The woman released him.

"Delphox, we're leaving," the woman said.

"Calem!" Grace screamed.

By now, the neighbors had begun to emerge, drawn by the commotion, and the elderly Mrs. Petunia from next door in her frumpy nightgown and hair curlers threw herself at Grace to keep her from getting too close to the commotion. Someone was shouting something about calling the police.

The woman recalled her Pyroar and Talonflame when the latter deigned to land, its beak dripping yellowish Bug discharge and its belly crusted with blood. Its dark eyes were ringed with yellow feathers, like demonic war paint, which was all Calem could think when it glared at him.

Delphox approached the woman with Serena in tow and set her down on the ground before the woman recalled it, too, and tossed out her final Pokéball. In the flash of light, an enormous Charizard emerged and stretched its leathery wings, jaws hanging open and its sunburst scales glowing in the flickering firelight left over from Delphox's Flamethrower.

The woman lifted Serena up bridal style and positioned her in the generous leather saddle strapped to Charizard's back. Calem saw what

the woman meant to do and crawled toward Aegislash.

"Don't try it," the woman warned him.

He ignored her and reached for Aegislash, who was struggling to pull itself out from the ground. She sighed, exasperated, and slammed her booted foot down on Calem's hand. He grunted from the shock and immediate pain and crumpled pathetically, seeing stars.

"You're a Steel Adamantine, right?" the woman said. "It doesn't matter how tough your skin is. Steel always melts under an open flame. Know your place."

Bisharp was slowly making its way back to Calem, but it was in bad shape after the direct and protracted Flamethrower it had swallowed.

The woman gave his crushed fingers one last sickening crunch under her heel and headed for her Charizard. She mounted it behind Serena to hold her in place. Serena's head lolled on her shoulder, and the sight of her passed out like that stoked Calem's helpless fury even through the elemental pain in his arms and hand. He could barely move.

"I'll come for her," he bit out through chattering teeth. "And you'll die for this."

The woman patted her Charizard and adjusted her stylish sunglasses. She cast a glance at the gathering crowd of retirees and housewives and small town folks, bored.

"A word of advice," she said. "Forget about her."

With that, she signaled to Charizard, and the orange pseudo-Dragon took off into the sky in a rush of wind. Bisharp finally made it to Calem's side and silently dug Aegislash's blade out of the ground. The possessed sword retrieved its shield and snaked its ribbons around Calem's middle and shoulders, gently lifting him from the ground.

Now that the immediate threat was gone, Grace and the other Vaniville Town residents rushed to Calem's aid. Klefki was with Grace and jingled frantically next to Calem's ear.

"Calem, can you hear me? Calem!" Grace had him by the shoulders, her blue eyes wide and wet.

Another neighbor, a man in his forties, took one of Calem's burned

arms and started saying something about a hospital and doctors and Burn Heal, but Calem barely heard any of them.

"My daughter," Grace practically screamed at him. "Where is that woman taking her? Why didn't you stop her?!"

Calem's face ached: his left cheek and temple were ripped to shreds and blood dripped below the collar of his shirt. Bisharp stood behind him, a silent shield, and Calem tore his gaze away from Grace to look at Escavalier's broken body dashed on the sidewalk.

"I don't know," he said, his words slurred.

He'd lost a lot of blood from his arms, and the pain washed over him again in gentle waves, almost soporific. Tears streamed down his ruined cheek like acid over the open wound, and his broken hand throbbed with the slightest movement.

"I don't know," he said again.

Grace wailed, overcome with grief, and Mrs. Petunia with her hair curlers had to hold onto her. Calem wobbled on his feet, seeing dark spots in his vision, and the last thing he remembered were hands grabbing at him, disembodied voices, and the smile in that woman's voice as she burned him to the bone. There was nothing he could have done, not against her. He was too weak.

"*Know your place."*

Serena was gone.

5. Chapter 5

Wanderer
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

When Calem woke up, he was groggy, his head felt like someone had stuck a bike pump in his ear and inflated his head, and he had a ravenous thirst like he'd never had before. Dark eyes, bleary from sleep and whatever drugs were coursing through his system, opened slowly and he looked around. The room he was in was white with textured ceiling tiles you could trace patterns in for hours like constellations in the stars. He was in a bed, a gurney with metal railings, and thick blankets covered him up to his chest. His arms, however, were each heavily bandaged and suspended in slings attached to pulleys set up on either side of his bed. An IV tube fed him a faintly glowing, orange liquid. A thick bandage had been taped over the entire left side of his face and over his eye, and it stung when he moved his mouth and cheek.

Calem tried to sit up, but the slings holding up his arms made it hard. The pulleys squeaked, and his bed groaned under his weight. The sound woke the person snoozing in the uncomfortable, wooden chair in the corner.

"Calem, you're awake." Sycamore stifled a yawn and got up out of the chair.

"Professor? What's going on? Where am I?"

Sycamore smiled a little and laid his hand over Calem's forehead. His prayer beads clinked as they shifted along his forearm. Something else clinked to Calem's right, and Klefki, looking equally as sleepy as Sycamore, floated into his line of sight. It began to squeak and jingle its key collection as it hovered.

"Klefki's been here with you the whole time," Sycamore said, eyeing the small Pokémon. "I tried getting him back into his Pokéball, but he refused to return. He's been very worried about you."

Calem tried to sit up again, and Sycamore pressed a hand gently against his chest.

"Hey, take it easy now. You're still healing."

"What happened?"

"You don't remember?"

Calem tried to think, but his mind was sluggish from the drugs dulling the pain of his injuries, and he coughed. Sycamore retrieved a glass from the nightstand and filled it with water from a plastic jug. Calem eagerly gulped it down when offered, spilling some on his chest over the hospital gown he wore. It alleviated some of the pain in his parched throat.

"What's the last thing you can remember?" Sycamore asked when Calem finished drinking.

He tried to focus. His arms flared with pain all of a sudden, and he hissed. Sycamore reached for him, concerned.

"I remember...burning. That woman..." His eyes widened. "Serena. She took Serena!"

He tried to sit up again, and Sycamore eased him back against the bed. "Okay, okay, I know you're feeling anxious, but I need you to stay calm. You're safe now."

"Me? What about Serena? That crazy woman took her!"

"I know, Grace told me what happened when she brought you to the lab."

"Lab? Are we in Lumiose?"

Sycamore nodded. "Grace called me in the middle of the night last night and told me what had happened. I arranged for you to be airlifted out here since the clinic in Vaniville wasn't equipped to treat your burns. Calem." He paused, searching Calem's eyes as a wave of concern passed through him. "Your burns were nearly bone-deep, much worse than third degree. I'm not a medical doctor, but from what the doctor explained to me, it's like your arms came into contact with molten lava. You nearly died from the shock, not to mention the blood loss."

Calem tried to listen to what Sycamore was saying. Died? Lava?

"If Grace hadn't called me when she did, we could have lost you."

Calem swallowed hard. He didn't know what to say.

"Here's what's going on," Sycamore went on gently. "You're in my lab

here in Lumiose. I've had a doctor and a nurse on call here to treat you, but they say you'll recover. That's Burn Heal in the IV." He nodded to the IV stand. "They've refilled it three times now. It's going to take a couple days for the wounds to heal, but they'll heal and you'll be back to yourself again. The doctor even said you'd be up and about as early as this evening if you rest today.

"Your parents are out of town, but I sent word to them. Your mother's in Laverre, so I'm hoping she'll be able to return soon, but I sent your father on fieldwork to Geosenge a few days ago, so he may not get my message right away. But either way, you're in my care now, and I promise I'm doing everything I can to help you make a full and speedy recovery, okay?"

Calem nodded numbly. "Yeah, okay."

"Now, I know you're tired and probably a little woozy from all the Burn Heal, but I need to know if you can remember anything from your encounter with this woman who abducted Serena. Did she say anything that might tell us who she is, where she came from? Maybe what she wanted with Serena?"

Calem lay back in bed and tried to remember. Klefki jingled near his ear, its beady eyes downcast as it floated forlornly overhead.

"...She was Ignifera," he said finally.

"Ignifera, good. That explains the burns, but I've never seen them so bad before. She must be a particularly powerful Ignifera."

"She said I should know my place."

Sycamore sighed and rubbed his temples. "Calem, I know it may feel like you failed, but you didn't. You couldn't have predicted this would happen, and you weren't prepared for it. No one was. You were alone out there with a severe type disadvantage and no one who could viably back you up. Please don't blame yourself."

Calem barely heard him as memories of the previous night's harrowing battle came back to him, slowly at first and now flooding his mind, pushing through the haze of the drugs in his system. Talonflame had torn Escavalier's helmet off and gorged itself on Escavalier's exposed flesh, then discarded the rest like trash. His visible right eye watered and burned as the anger and shame threatened to spill out.

And Serena...

"Calem," Sycamore said again.

"She knew Serena was a Magus," Calem said. He held Sycamore's gaze. "She knew, Professor."

Sycamore's expression went carefully blank and he got that glint in his eye that meant he was thinking light years ahead, scouring his sharp mind and the vast collection of information he kept up there.

"How could she know? You haven't told anyone, right?"

Sycamore shook his head. "No, never. And I assume you haven't, either. Grace would have no reason to, it's her daughter that was taken. And Alain knew, of course, but he's been gone for years."

Calem narrowed his eye, but Sycamore put up a hand.

"Stop, I know what you're thinking. Titans lie, I know their reputation, but I've known Alain since he was a boy. He wouldn't betray Serena, not when they were so close and it's been so long."

"Well, is there anyone else who knows? Maybe someone found out?"

Sycamore fell quiet, and Calem read his silence. The haze was beginning to clear as he got to thinking about Serena, about what had happened, his monumental failure.

"Professor," he pressed.

"...My personal assistant, Dexio," Sycamore relented. "But I've known him for years, and he's always been loyal to me, even when my colleagues thought I was a crackpot chasing Fairies. He was always supporting me through the worst of it. He would never..."

Calem's blood boiled, the ache in his arms and face nugatory as he began to jump to conclusions. "Where is he?"

"Hold on there, cowboy. Dexio knows about Serena, but he's been extremely helpful with her and all my research for as long as I've known him. I just can't believe he would sell her out. No, it had to be something else, a leak perhaps."

Calem was not convinced. "I can't believe you'd have a leak, unless it was through someone who already knew the secret. And right now, my money's on Alain or Dexio."

Sycamore gave Calem a withering look. "Look, we'll discuss this more when you're feeling better."

"I'm feeling fine. Get me out of these things." Calem tugged on the slings.

"Not a chance. You're going to recover here until dinner, then we'll see what the doctor says about it."

"I said I'm fine, I can take the pain."

Sycamore frowned, and there was ice in his tone when he spoke next. "You're not fine. And I'm not going to be the one to explain to your parents that you overexerted yourself and ended up making your near fatal injuries worse. So you're going to stay in that bed and get some sleep or I'll have the nurse put you under to force you. Am I clear?"

Calem groaned and lay back in bed. "Yeah, yeah, I got it."

"Good. I've got some work to do so I'll have to head out for a bit, but I wanted to let you know that I took Aegislash and Bisharp to the Pokémon Center. Bisharp was pretty beat up, but Nurse Joy said she would make a full recovery in a couple days."

Calem averted his gaze as he thought about Escavalier. "Yeah, thanks Professor."

Sycamore laid a hand on Calem's shoulder. "I'm so sorry about Escavalier," he said softly. "I know how close you were."

Calem said nothing, and Sycamore let his hand fall.

"Please try to rest. The sooner you get better, the sooner we can get to the bottom of this and get Serena back."

Sycamore excused himself from the small room and closed the door behind him. Klefki remained and hovered over Calem's head, its keys swaying.

"Rest, huh?" Calem said. "I guess that's all I'm good for now."

Klefki squeaked, its jeweled heart pulsing faintly as it peered down at Calem.

"I'll get her back," he vowed. "I don't care what it takes, I'll find her."

The Burn Heal in his IV dripped slowly, soothing his roasted arms and

lulling him back into the haze, where he replayed that fight in his mind over and over, searching for a way he could have won. He found none.

It had been two days since Alain confided his story to Korrina, and they had not spoken of it since. Not to each other, not to Gurkinn, not to anyone. She'd gone to bed that night reeling and a little lightheaded. She'd never expected him to be straight with her, come clean about what he was really up to, and in retrospect she felt ashamed at how surprised she'd been when he started talking. Titans were liars, master manipulators out for themselves and nobody else.

But Alain had told her the truth, and now she understood why it had been so hard for him. Why he'd chosen the life of a vanither rather than stay loyal to the clan. Why he took all her suspicious allegations, her sour demeanor when he'd arrived, the brutal training to which she'd subjected him without mercy these past months. Gurkinn had been right all along. Alain was wandering, adrift with nowhere to go, nowhere but here. He was searching for something, and until now Korrina hadn't cared much whether he found it or not, waiting for him to reveal his true colors and disappoint Gurkinn and her like so many others had before him.

But he told her the truth, and she did not know what to do about it.

Now, as she stood in Training Room Eight after hours opposite Lucario, she was lost in thought and a little cold in her workout clothes. Lucario, long ears up and alert, watched her with steady, red eyes.

"*Why are you torturing yourself?"*

Lucario yipped, startling Korrina out of her thoughts, and she laid a hand on its shoulder. Alain didn't understand. That wasn't his fault, but it didn't change the fact that he didn't get it, he didn't know.

You could tell him, a voice in her head whispered.

She could tell him. She could tell him everything. She could trust him, take a chance, and hope he wouldn't change his mind about her. But Korrina had learned a long time ago that hope was for shit if you didn't have the force of strength and will to turn it into reality. Her Gym trainers didn't come here to have hope, they came to become strong. This was the real world. Prayers to invisible gods went unanswered, people were all selfish at heart, and the only person you

could really depend on was yourself.

What about Grandpa? the voice prodded her.

"Grandpa already did more than anyone should ever have to," she said aloud, eyes far away.

Lucario blinked up at her and swished its tail as she scratched it behind the ear absently.

Had Alain been selfish when he told her the truth? Wasn't he here to learn, totally dependent on her expertise and Gurkinn's wisdom to pull himself out of the hole he'd fallen into? Korrina didn't follow any religion or believe in any gods, only in what she could see and touch and knock down with her two fists. And the last time she'd believed in anyone other than Gurkinn, she ended up in the hospital for three knee surgeries and woke up alone in the world, just twelve years old. Around the same time Alain would have left the Apep Dynasty, now that she thought about it. Also alone. Wandering. Drifting, like her.

It's different.

Lucario yipped again and butted her chest with its cold snout. Korrina frowned down at it.

"It *is* different," she insisted like a child.

Lucario merely stared, letting her draw her own conclusions.

"Don't look at me like that."

She went to the mini fridge and grabbed a bottle of water, but she wasn't thirsty. Lucario sat down on its haunches and yawned.

"Why is it different?" she whispered.

I don't know.

Her muscles ached, but not from the exertion. She'd been sparring with Lucario today, but now the desire was no longer there. There was only the itch, the need to hit something. Before she could stop herself, she crushed the water bottle in her hand and spilled icy water all over her bare feet.

"Shit!"

She jumped back, surprised by the cold, and grumbled under her

breath. Lucario continued to watch her, silent.

"Seriously, stop looking at me like that."

She downed what little was left of the water bottle, and then wiped up the mess on the floor with a paper towel. The weight room was empty right now, and the heavy punching bag swung just slightly on its well-oiled chain. Yeah, fine. That would do for a quick fix.

Recalling Lucario, Korrina headed into the weight room, ran through some stretches, and then began pummeling the punching bag. She moved fast, delivering a swift uppercut then spinning for a roundhouse, then jabbing left, right, a surprise knee to the gut, punch again. Again, again, again. The adrenaline built up under her skin, got her blood pumping, and her muscles sang as she gave them the release they needed. Almost.

The punching bag didn't retch, didn't fall back. There was no pleasing crunch of bone, no slap of skin, and most of all, there was no return, no retaliation, no counter attack. Korrina punched harder, faster, her bangs damp with sweat and sticking to her forehead, her clothes sticky, the deodorant she'd applied earlier wearing off.

"Hit me," she ground out, letting another punch fly.

The punching bag swung precariously on its chain, and Korrina lunged after it with a mean uppercut, then a sweeping low kick. The chain whined on its hinge.

"Come on, hit me!"

The bag swung toward her, propelled by gravity, and Korrina jumped with all her strength and drove her foot into the bag in a high-speed kick. The force of her attack ripped the punching bag clean off its hinge, and it crashed to the floor. Korrina landed in a crouched position, her hands on the mat, breathing heavily.

Prickling on the back of her neck. Eyes. She whipped around, green eyes wide.

"Alain?"

There was no one there. The Gym was dark, the trainers all gone home for the night. Gurkinn was taking his after dinner tea, and Alain was probably relaxing like a normal person after a long day of training.

Korrina rubbed her arms for warmth despite the exertion. She needed a hot shower. Stretching again to prevent soreness, she lifted the punching bag and set it against the wall. Tomorrow, she'd make sure to call someone to come reinstall it.

A half hour later, Korrina was showered and changed into stretchy nylon capris and an oversized long sleeved shirt with the words 'Shalour Gym' emblazoned in blue over the chest, still feeling the chill despite the balmy ocean breeze. She'd put her damp hair in a braid and curled the braid into a bun to keep it from wetting her shoulders. There was no one on the second floor, but there were leftovers from the dinner she'd skipped, so she helped herself and sat alone at the table.

It was a nice night, quiet, only a few clouds in the sky to blot out the stars. The wind tunnel whistled with the breeze that swept in from the north, where Gurkinn had left only the screen door closed to let in the fresh air. She wondered where Alain was. Maybe he was in his room? She hadn't heard anything when she'd been up on the third floor. Outside, then?

Korrina scratched her forehead and stared at her empty plate. What did it matter where he was? He was a grown man, he could look out for himself. She tried to imagine him as a child, scared and alone and shivering with Tyrunt asleep in his lap as he huddled in a dark corner of Frost Cavern, those sparkling blue eyes wide and wet with tears as he tried to be brave for them both. She couldn't imagine what that must have been like for him, how he'd survived it. She'd seen how he'd bent Goodra's will, how he'd manipulated the Goomy and Sliggoo to let them pass like a demigod commands mortal creatures to do his bidding, and even now it was hard to swallow.

The worst part was, she was curious. How did he do it? What was it like? Could he communicate with them telepathically? Some Clairvoyants could read minds, and most could communicate telepathically with Psychic Pokémon. Korrina didn't know any Clairvoyants (happily), but she knew about them. The powerful ones were all well known. Caitlin the Graea in Unova, a blind Seer of futures not yet foretold. There was Olympia of Anistar City here in Kalos, rumored to have the power to connect find any Psychic Pokémon or fellow Clairvoyant simply if she thought about it. And the waif twins, Tate and Liza of Mossdeep City in Hoenn, who were said to be able to exorcise Ghosts that possessed people and Pokémon and even kill them, but Korrina didn't know if that was true. Everyone said you couldn't kill a Ghost because it was already dead.

And there was a Pokémon professor from Kanto whose death some time ago had affected Gurkinn, who had known the old Clairvoyant personally in his younger years. He was supposed to be a brilliant researcher, this Professor Samuel Oak, and apparently he had a grandson. Gary Oak, a young but gifted Clairvoyant who had taken over as the Viridian City Gym Leader in Kanto. Korrina had never met any of them, and she hoped she never would. Clairvoyants and their Psychics were notoriously antagonistic toward Bellators. She'd heard about how the Saffron City Gym Leader, Sabrina, had used her Clairvoyance to oust the rightful Bellator Gym Leader and ran the city illegally for years before the other Kanto Gym Leaders rallied and finally put a stop to her. Some of the rumors recounted that some no-name Reaper had decapitated her and paraded her head around Saffron. Others swore it was one of Sabrina's own kind, a Clairvoyant like her, that had been her demise. Whatever the story, Sabrina was long dead, and the Bellators were back in charge of Saffron for the long run.

Titans were about the furthest you could get from Clairvoyants, but Korrina had to wonder. How did he do it? Alain had talked about control, how it drove all Titans. What did that mean? Would he explain it if she asked? Korrina looked up from her empty plate all of a sudden, flushed. She *wanted* to ask. She wanted to know what he felt, what it was like, what it meant to him.

She got up and deposited her dishes in the sink to wash. She went through the motions mechanically, not really present, as her mind wandered. It did that a lot lately since the Goodra incident, and it always ended up in the same place.

Wiping her forehead of a light sheen of salty sweat that had beaded there, Korrina finished her dishes and headed downstairs. She wandered to the porch deck and went to the mini fridge, but someone was already seated on the porch.

"Hey," Alain said. He held out a beer bottle for her. "I thought you'd be down soon." He caught sight of her shirt and smirked. "Nice team spirit."

Korrina eyed him, wondering if it was worth it to punch him in the face just to see him fall off that chair. "You know me. Always peppy."

Alain snorted. She ignored him and looked toward the beach. His Pokémon were out and lounging. Charizard had brought back a Grumpig carcass to feast on from wherever it had gone to hunt, and

Tyrantrum and Heliolisk were finishing off a Tauros they had killed earlier in the day. Upon hearing voices, Heliolisk perked up and ran back to the porch, long tail swishing behind it as it waddled toward Alain and Korrina. It stopped just short of Alain's sunning chair and licked its eyeball. Korrina made a face.

"Does that taste good, Heliolisk?" she asked.

Alain chuckled. "The mystery of the century."

Korrina crossed her arms, eyed the beer Alain still held out for her, and finally accepted it. She pulled up the nearest sunning chair and leveled it parallel with Alain's, a couple feet apart, and sat down. Heliolisk hopped onto the foot of Alain's chair and curled up to nap.

"She really likes you, huh?" Korrina said as she took a sip of her beer and hugged her knees to her chest.

Alain let his arm hang over the side of his chair in between them, his beer bottle dangling from his fingers. "Yeah, she's definitely the affectionate type. Which is sometimes a problem. I've probably been electrocuted more times than the average person."

"I hear it's good for your complexion," she teased.

"Oh great, so long as my skin is flawless then my life is complete."

They shared a laugh, then fell into an easy silence. The waves were ever constant, beating ceaselessly against the shore and leaving dark shadows in the wet sand as they receded. The jellyfish were out again tonight, as they were every night in the summer months. They would be feasting on Wailmer and Carvanha at this time. Their red bulbous false eyes were hauntingly beautiful to look upon in the moonlight so long as you ignored their gory purpose.

"Were you training until now?" Alain broke the silence.

"Sort of. I broke a punching bag."

Alain sat up in his chair. "You *broke* a punching bag?"

Korrina took a swig of her beer. "What? Like you've never done that?"

"Hell no I've never done that. Those things weigh a shit ton, Korrina. How'd you break it?"

She shrugged. "I dunno, I just kicked it really hard. The chain broke."

He shook his head. "Goddamn, woman."

She shifted in her seat to face him. "Hey, if you have something to say to me, then say it."

He put up his hands. "No, it's not like that."

"Then what's it like?"

"I dunno. You're just a real beast, I guess. Remind me never to piss you off. I mean, more than I already do."

She thought about that for a moment. "You don't piss me off."

Alain snorted. "And they call me a liar."

Korrina crossed her legs and leaned over her armrest. "I'm not lying."

"Oh, then what do you call, like, every day since I got here?"

"That's just me."

Alain blinked, the smarmy look on his face gone. "Did you mean what you said the other night?"

"What did I say the other night?"

"That you like me," he said quickly. "I mean, that you don't completely hate me."

Is this what he worries about?

"Sure, I meant it. I like you better than any other Titan."

He was looking at her with an earnest intensity in those riveting blue eyes, and she suddenly realized he was not messing around. Korrina cradled her beer in both hands and tapped the neck with her fingers to distract from his scrutiny.

"I did mean it," she said softly. "I thought about what you told me, and...I'm sorry. I really am. And not just because of what you told me." She bit her lip, searching for the right words. "These past months, you've worked really hard and you've given me every reason to trust your intentions. And that time with Goodra in the mines... I've never seen a Titan in action, to be honest. It was... It was really incredible, what you did. And knowing what I do now about how you learned to do that, well..." She tightened her grip on the bottle and forced herself

to meet his gaze. "Thanks. I can't imagine how difficult it must've been for you to use that power after what you went through."

Alain took a steadying breath and rolled his shoulders. "Thanks, Korrina. That means a lot more than you probably realize. I'm..." He let out a sharp breath. "Thanks."

They fell into another protracted silence, and Korrina's stomach twisted as it dragged on. She'd never had much of a problem finding something to say (or not say) to Alain before, but she was coming up short now. Perhaps he sensed her discomfort and broke the silence.

"So...did you really break a punching bag?"

Korrina rolled her eyes. "Oh, shut up."

"I bet you mauled the shit out of it. What'd it ever do to you?"

"I didn't *maul* it. I'm not like Tyrantrum, god."

"You can be."

"Ha ha, fuck you."

"Well, better than mauling Mega Lucario, I think. The battered victim look doesn't suit you at all."

Korrina went very still and did her best to stay calm, not respond, not even think, but he noticed. She saw it in his eyes that narrowed, in his mouth as it hung open, his hands that inadvertently reached for her just a little.

"I think...that came out wrong," he said, his voice a little hoarse like he dared not speak too loudly for fear of rousing the phantoms that slept in these sands with their dirty secrets and blood long washed away in those ceaseless waves.

"*I'm wondering when I'll finally just find something I don't want to run away from.*"

"Korrina," Alain said softly.

She blinked a few times, and her hand automatically went to her left knee and traced the long, ugly scar concealed under her pants. "No, it's fine. I think... After you trusted me with the truth about you, I've been feeling like I owe you the same."

"You don't owe me anything. You and Gurkinn have done enough for me already."

She shook her head. "No, I think, I mean I *know* you deserve the same respect you've shown us. Me. And I haven't been giving that to you since you got here."

He hesitated before saying, "I'll admit, I've been wondering what your deal is for a while now."

She forced a smile. "Yeah, I can tell. It's not that I don't want you to know, it's just... Talking about it makes it real all over again. I can't escape it no matter what I do, and as long as I feel that way, it's like..."

"...Like you'll never be strong enough to face it?"

Korrina wiped her nose. "Look, I never got shipped off from my family as a kid and forced into indentured servitude. I don't want you of all people to feel sorry for me, okay? Shit, what happened to you... I can't even wrap my head around it."

He frowned. "Just 'cause I went through some shit doesn't make whatever happened to you any less important or something. You don't think that, do you?"

"I wish I did. Maybe then it'd be a little easier."

Alain finished off his beer and set the empty bottle on the floor. He leaned toward her, leaning over his knees and his back slightly hunched. "Tell me what happened."

Tyrantrum crunched through Tauros's femur, the *crack* reaching the porch like someone had split firewood with an axe.

Korrina took a deep breath. She hadn't spoken about this to anyone, not since the police interviewed her in the hospital when she woke up from that first surgery. She remembered how young Farron had seemed back then in his crisp uniform, no wrinkles or grey hairs, his eyes kind and steady as he shared a pint of ice cream with her and gently coaxed the story out of her.

"My parents are dead," Korrina said bluntly. "You probably figured that since they're not here and we never talk about them."

"I had a feeling it was something like that," Alain admitted.

"They died when I was a kid, first my mom, then my dad a few months later." She blinked and met his gaze, strangely unemotional as she talked about them. "My mom committed suicide."

Alain, however, reacted instantly. His face slackened, his eyes widened, and he clasped his hands together for something to hold onto. "Shit, I'm sorry."

"Don't be. She took the coward's way out. She knew exactly what she was doing."

Alain rubbed his mouth, wanting to say something but thinking better of it.

"I should explain," Korrina went on, swallowing the knot in her throat and washing it down with a sip of lukewarm beer. "My mother was a skuff. Her parents had been Bellators, but she came here when they kicked her out of the house. She was sixteen. You know how it is, Tamer parents with a defunct kid." Korrina pressed her lips in a thin line. "We never found out anything about them. I think Mom was too afraid of them to ever tell Grandpa anything. I tried to track them down myself a few years ago, got as close as Dewford Town in Hoenn, but the trail went cold. Lucky for them. I would've beat their faces in if I'd found them. Fucking classist pigs."

"So your mom came out here when she was a teenager?"

Korrina nodded. "Yeah. She got a job in the city as a nurse in the local hospital. Her parents were Bellators, but she'd never liked fighting, being a skuff and all. Anyway, that's how she met my dad. He was a hotshot Bellator training to take over the Gym for Grandpa one day. He had all the right ingredients—handsome face, good family, stable lifestyle, charismatic and charming to a fault. A great catch, I guess you could say. Mom thought so, anyway. You can guess what happened next. They met, married pretty young, and had me. A big happy family."

If Alain detected the sarcasm in her tone, he wisely said nothing. Instead, he got them some more beers and gave Heliolisk a head rub when it hissed at his temporary leaving.

"I grew up in this place," Korrina went on. "I learned how to fight here. I caught my first Pokémon, Pancham, in the forest west of here. Shalour's in my blood, and it was all I knew and loved growing up. I had a great childhood." She smiled a little sadly, the wistful memories like pictures preserved in glass frames in the corridors of her mind,

protected from the rest of the world and the darkness that sagged against the walls, always there, threatening to break in. But she never let it. "I had a great childhood," she said again, "because Mom absorbed all the ugliness so I wouldn't see it."

She fell silent, staring at the fresh beer in her hand but not thirsty. The silence pressed on, and Alain spoke up.

"I'm not really follow—"

"My dad beat my mom," Korrina interrupted, her voice sounding far away from her body, as though she were looking down at herself. "They were happy, then they had me and they were still happy, and then... I dunno. Things changed. Dad couldn't use Mega Evolution, not properly. He had a Lucario, like every Bellator in our family, but he just couldn't get the mechanics down. Sometimes it just does doesn't work. The connection with the Pokémon isn't right. It takes a lot more than just having a viable Pokémon and being a Tamer. It's so much more, and Dad didn't have that, or maybe he did and he lost it. I dunno.

"But that was the start of it. I was seven when he started getting angry. He'd train and fight until he collapsed, then he'd hit the bars, wash down all the pain, then start again. Eventually it got to the point where he was pounding bottles more than punching bags. Nobody wanted to train with him anymore. The other Bellators who would come to Shalour just to train with Grandpa stopped coming. Even the stories about Mega Evolution stopped being enough to entice people into coming. The Gym suffered, and Shalour suffered. Grandpa said he couldn't hand over the Gym to Dad if he was an alcoholic and a failure at Mega Evolution. So Dad took out his anger on the one person who couldn't leave—Mom.

"I didn't know what was happening. I was outside all the time playing with Pancham and Torchic, and Mom was really good at hiding the evidence. She was a skuff, so she couldn't fight like Dad could, but skuffs still inherit the blood. She could survive his punches, the worst of his temper tantrums. She survived them for almost three years, until one day she just couldn't take it anymore."

"*I'm sorry, baby. I'm just so tired.*"

Korrina glanced over her shoulder at the phantom voice she heard so often in her dreams, the hollow echo of one already dead the day she'd uttered that pathetic apology to a ten-year-old. Alain watched

her move, her green eyes dart around as though looking for something, and he set his jaw.

"She climbed to the top of the tower and jumped," Korrina went on almost as an afterthought. "She never said a word to Grandpa or anybody else. But she had to know. She wasn't stupid. She had to know Dad would turn on me when she was gone, and even still she left me all alone with him. Her own daughter."

"Oh fuck, Korrina." Alain rubbed his eyes.

It was the saddest he'd ever sounded, even more than when he'd told her about himself, and she had the absurd urge to hold him, tell him it was all right, this was just a sad story that had happened to some other little girl a long, long time ago somewhere far from here.

"He didn't start hitting me right away. We were all so sad about Mom. I didn't understand it, and Grandpa was even more surprised. He was so oblivious back then. He had the Gym to worry about, the town, and no respectable heir. I can't blame him looking back. At least, not after what happened.

"I was almost eleven and I told Dad I wanted to catch a Riolu for my birthday. I thought I was ready. Torchic had evolved into Combusken, Pancham was getting stronger every day, and I was a Bellatrix, just like Grandpa. I wanted to Mega Evolve one day, just like Grandpa. Something I said set him off. I don't even remember what I said, exactly. I assume he didn't want me talking about Grandpa, like I hero-worshipped him or something. Doesn't matter. I saw the change in him like the darkness that creeps into a room when you dim the lights. It's not instantaneous, but you can *see* it happening right before your eyes. He looked different from one moment to the next, but he was fast. Bellators are fast. I didn't have time to be scared. He slugged me in the face, and I fell backwards and crashed into a coffee table. My fall broke the wood.

"He left even madder, screaming something about how I shouldn't make him so mad, and how could I be so selfish when Mom had just died? Pancham and Combusken helped me to my room and laid me on the bed. My face hurt and I would bruise, but I was a Bellatrix. I was tough."

She trailed off, lost in the memory. She could still remember the throbbing in her face. He hadn't broken a bone, but it sure felt like he had. The broken coffee table had ripped through the back of her shirt

and cut her, but she lay on her stomach to avoid the pain and let the blood dry. When Gurkinn noticed the black and yellow shiner a few days later, she'd said something about falling from a tree, afraid her dad might hit her again if she tattled.

"It went on for a few months. Most days I'd avoid him and his ire, but sometimes I couldn't. I thought maybe I could scare him off with my Pokémon, but his Lucario was so much bigger than Combusken, and he had a Machoke that I'd been afraid of since I was small. So I didn't risk it.

"I began to hate myself. What did I do to make him so mad at me? Did he miss Mom so much that he had to take it out on me for some reason? I made up so many excuses, and I was always the bad guy, never him. He was my dad, he had to have a reason. And then I started to hate Mom. Things had been fine until she died. I was young, but I wasn't too young to understand the concept of suicide. Grandpa explained that she took her own life because she was sad and troubled, and she didn't want to hurt anymore. But with her gone, now I was hurting. It was her fault. She left me alone with Dad, and he hurt me because he couldn't hurt her anymore."

Korrina sniffled, but she didn't cry.

"I still blame her in many ways. She abandoned me. I know she had her reasons, and I know she was too far gone for help at that point. I can't hold that against her when she was just desperate to stop the pain. But I was her daughter. You're supposed to be able to count on your parents to keep you safe. That's what they're there for, right? But she *abandoned* me. She didn't even *try* to stop the monster she'd escaped, not even for her own *daughter*. I hate her for it, even now. I don't think I'll ever forgive her, or him."

"I don't blame you," Alain said softly.

Korrina rubbed her arms over the long sleeves, a little chilled all of a sudden. "Anyway, to get to the point, the last time Dad came after me, I fought back. I didn't want to feel this way anymore. He wasn't my dad anymore when he got like that. He was a monster that lived in the corner that came out sometimes without warning and didn't leave until he ate another piece of me. He'd come home from drinking pretty late that night. I was up going to the bathroom, and he caught me heading back to my room.

"He told me to come and sit with him, but I didn't want to. So he got

angry and ended up chasing me back to my room like a fucking animal. I tried to reach the Pokéballs in the drawer on my nightstand, but he grabbed my hair and threw me down. I started screaming, and he punched me to shut me up. So I kicked him as hard as I could in the shin, and he started screaming. It didn't give me much time, but I got up and tried to run to Grandpa's room on the floor above. I made it to the stairs when Dad caught up to me.

"He picked me up and threw me against the wall, and when I fell he crawled on top of me. He," Korrina's breath hitched, and she clutched her left knee. "He punched my knee over and over until it cracked, and then he punched it again until it was just a pulpy mess. The whole time I was trying to smack his face, scratch him, anything to make it stop.

"And then it did stop. Grandpa woke up, maybe he heard me screaming, and he threw Dad off of me. Dad was drunk and it was dark, so he was slower than normal. I don't... I don't really remember what happened next. All I remember is the sound. It was like a sponge squeezing out water. I learned later that Grandpa strangled Dad to death. He killed him right there in front of me, his own son, and then he scooped me up and rushed me to the hospital."

Alain stared at her, gaze hard and his breathing faster than normal. "What happened to Gurkinn?"

"Nothing. He'd already talked to Farron before I woke up from surgery, and I didn't really understand what had happened. Grandpa still won't really talk about what happened, but I think he and Farron came to some kind of arrangement. Grandpa didn't go to prison, and Farron didn't turn him in. I've tried asking Farron about it now that I'm an adult, but he never talks about it, either. Maybe they were protecting me, who knows? I don't care."

"*You're safe now,"* Gurkinn's promise whispered in her ear.

"Wow," Alain said. "That's... I can't believe you survived that. I mean, I can believe *you* survived it. But I just... Goddamn. And Gurkinn, his own son... I mean, I would've done the same in his position, at least, I wanna think I would."

"Grandpa was different after that, as you can probably imagine."

Korrina told Alain about how Gurkinn transformed almost into a different person entirely. Before he'd been so absorbed in the Gym and his duties, in his legacy, the family name, and now he'd all but given

that up. He devoted his life to taking care of Korrina, raising her, and he scaled back his Gym Leader duties.

Farron, who had been a uniformed junior officer in the Shalour Police Department at the time, rose quickly in the ranks under Gurkinn's patronage and completely revamped the department. The police took over the bulk of security measures and provisions. They paid Pokémon trainers and even a few Tamers who were willing to take on the risk to join the force and take over the Gym's normal patrol duties, monitoring feral Pokémon in the area and the like. Korrina suspected that Gurkinn had traded his freedom for guaranteed backing as Farron rose in the ranks and eventually became Sherriff, but she'd never gotten the truth out of either of them.

And Gurkinn never, ever talked about his son after that. Even when Korrina was older and she understood what had happened, he would never entertain any conversation on the topic. He became the father she should have had, but it wasn't the same, and he couldn't undo the past.

"I know he regrets what he did," Korrina said. "I would, too, I guess, if I'd done what he did. And I think, as some kind of penance, he trained me. He did everything for me. He taught me the secrets of Mega Evolution, named me his successor. A real dream come true, huh."

"Why do you fight Mega Lucario?" Alain asked all of a sudden.

Korrina frowned. "You mean you didn't figure it out after everything I just told you?"

"No... Should I have?"

Korrina hugged her right knee to her chest and let the other leg hang off the edge of her chair. She took a long sip of her beer. "I fight Mega Lucario because I'm just like Dad. I can't stop."

"Wait, what? What does that mean?"

"You really don't know, do you? I guess you wouldn't. It's not like we advertise that kind of thing. Maybe like how you Titans don't talk about that hellish summer camp you all go on. Bellators, we... We have an addiction. An instinct. It's a need to fight."

"Fighting's what you guys are good at."

"No, it's more than that. It's not just some fun pastime. We *have* to

fight. It's like... It's like something in my body compels me to do it. That's why I train with Mack or Shiri every chance I get. Grandpa's old and he can usually meditate the urge away, but even he has to beat the crap out of something every so often. My Dad just didn't know when to stop. A lot of us don't know when to stop. And if we're not really careful, if we don't vent it properly, it can turn really bad for the people around us."

"That's... Yeah, I had no idea. You feel it like a physical need?"

Korrina gestured aimlessly as if to say 'dude, what're you gonna do?' "This thing we have, you and me and all the other Tamers out there? It's not just a gift. You can't have all this power, all this strength for free. Well, obviously you got that memo a long time ago." She drank some more of her beer. "Sometimes I think my dad didn't really get that part. Maybe that's why he couldn't Mega Evolve his Lucario. He couldn't accept his flaws or Lucario's."

"No, it's not free," Alain said. "But you still didn't answer my question."

"Hm?"

"Mega Lucario. Why do you fight him? Why torture yourself? What's the point?"

He was doing it again, that look that made her want to hug him close and reassure him that tomorrow was a new day, that she was here and she would protect him, fight for him. So morose, and so raw. Visceral, and those eyes were an illegal shade of blue she could have peered into forever until she wasted away to nothing. Was that what trust felt like? To be able to sit with a person, listen to them and look at them and let them look upon you and never want to leave? She wouldn't know from experience, but this wasn't the worst thing she could imagine.

"I guess... I want to feel strong. I just fell apart when my dad came after me, and even fighting back I couldn't do anything to stop him. I never want to feel that way again. If I can take my own punishment, then I can take anything."

Alain grabbed her hand and held it firmly in his without warning. "Korrina, oh my god. You *are* strong. You've gotta be the strongest person I know, and not just because you beat the crap outta me every day. But you were a child, there was nothing you could've done. You know that, right?"

His hand was cool in hers from holding the cold beer for so long. "I know that. I'm not an idiot."

"I didn't say you were."

"I told you I don't want you to feel sorry for me. It was a long time ago. I've put it behind me even if it's still shitty to think about. I'm the Gym Leader now. I can use Mega Evolution. I'm everything my dad could never be. I'm better than him, and I'm better than Mom. I'm not gonna just roll over and give up when shit gets rough. Whatever it takes, I'll keep getting stronger and I'll keep fighting."

"Okay, but getting stronger can't just be about inflicting as much pain as you can and seeing if you can survive it."

"No? Then what's it about? Please, *enlighten* me."

He rubbed his thumb over her knuckles and licked his lips, gaze drifting in and out of focus. "I think it's about finding other people who'll have your back, and who you can protect. Someone who'll pick you up when you fall, like Gurkinn picked you up after what happened with your dad. Someone... Someone who won't run when he doesn't know how to fix what's been ruined."

He looked at her then like he'd only just seen here sitting there, her hand in his, mouth slightly ajar.

"I think you just figured something out," she said, smiling softly. "Maybe...you really will find what you've been looking for here."

It happened fast. There was no buildup, none that was memorable, at least, and there was no heart-pounding flutter, no self-torturing doubt, no teenaged fervor tempered by awkward fumbling, reservation, that pesky 'this is a bad idea' kind of bullshit, because why? Why is it a bad idea? Why shouldn't she accept the possibility that maybe she'd figured something out, too.

Alain had her by the hand and he pulled her to him so fast that Korrina barely kept them from busting their noses against each other. She landed on his chest, plucked right out of her chair and onto his lap, and he grabbed her tied up hair like it offended him. Down came the blonde, cascading and still damp and wavy after so long wound up in a wet braid bun, over his fingers, around her shoulders, a veil splayed over their cheeks as he kissed her like he might die tonight.

The more she pushed, the more he pulled, and soon there was nothing

else and nowhere to go. He bit her lip and she hissed, and he *smiled*, the self-important prick. His fingers in her hair, tugging, electrifying, his thumb over her knuckles, his knee against her inner thigh, and close, so close, she couldn't breathe—

Woosh!

Something heavy struck the sandy beach, and Charizard snarled. Alain jumped, and Korrina almost fell on her butt, but he caught her, sort of, and really he shouldn't have bothered because she was half on the floor as it was. Heliolisk bolted upright and blasted a Thundershock into the sky, spooked, and Korrina's loose hair frizzled with static electricity.

Down on the beach, Tyrantrum had gone after what was left of the Grumpig carcass—the juicy head, obviously the best part—and Charizard was not down to share tonight. The two Dragons faced off, jaws slick with saliva and blood and black smoke curling from Charizard's sawed off nostrils.

"Shit," Alain said, hauling Korrina up onto the chair next to him before she had any say in the matter. "Hey, cut that out!" he shouted at the two of them.

Charizard glared at him, and Tyrantrum took the opportunity to snatch up Grumpig's entire head in its massive jaws. *Crunch.* Charizard snarled, smoking and spewing embers, but Tyrantrum backed off and lifted its tail, head down in that 'don't fuck with me' pose it got when it was feeling particularly arrogant. Charizard roared and lunged at Tyrantrum, claws first and jaws snapping, and the two of them tumbled together into the sand. Heliolisk darted off the sunning chair to intervene, hissing angrily that there was no choice head meat left for *it* to feast on.

"Oh my god," Korrina said.

"Damnit." Alain got up and ran to the beach. "Hey, I said cut it out!"

The two Dragons rolled around in the sand, snapping and scratching and snarling. Tyrantrum's head was like a boulder around which Charizard attempted to wrap its arms, but the dinosaur's skull was as hard as a rock and impenetrable unless Charizard tried something a little sharper. Tyrantrum slammed into the beach on its side, trying to shake Charizard off. Something gelatinous and reddish brown dripped from Tyrantrum's jaws—Grumpig's brain matter ground to a cheesy pulp. The smell sent Heliolisk into a tizzy and it started launching

weak Thunder Waves at its larger companions. Alain almost got smacked by Charizard's errant, flaming tail, and he was forced to stumble back.

"Charizard! Tyrantrum!"

Korrina got up, unsure what to do or if she should even intervene. Dragons were Alain's domain, not hers. She brushed her loose hair out of her face and breathed deeply, tasting salt on her tongue and lips, still tingling from that kiss he'd pulled out of her.

Alain finally got Charizard to let go of Tyrantrum's head and separated the two of them. Tyrantrum shook itself out and rained a small sandstorm all over Heliolisk and Alain.

"You two prima donnas finished?" Alain scolded them. "Come on, it's just a *head*."

Charizard stalked back to what little was left of the Grumpig carcass, sulking like a child at its pilfered prize, while Tyrantrum grumbled low in its belly and looked around, completely losing interest in Charizard and its temper tantrum. Heliolisk continued to screech indignantly and ran circles around Tyrantrum's thick legs, but it was ignored.

By the time Alain calmed down the prissy Dragons and headed back to the porch, Korrina was long gone.

Grace Gabena considered herself to be a patient woman. She wasn't a saint, but she could hold on for things to run their course without going stir crazy. When Serena had begun her long stints at Sycamore's lab here in Lumiose City, Grace had almost gone back the next day and taken her daughter back to Vaniville. But she didn't. Sometimes, when Serena was gone for longer periods, months instead of weeks, Grace would unplug her X-Transceiver so she couldn't be tempted to call the lab and inquire after her daughter. And when Serena had told her about a boy she'd met, a boy like her, Grace had let that go, too. Serena needed a friend, someone like her. Someone who could understand. Someone who wasn't Grace Gabena.

She let the Fairies stay. That snobbish Sylveon slept all day and followed Serena around and sometimes just stared openly at Grace like it was secretly plotting her murder by disembowelment. But Klefki had to be the most unsettling of all Serena's Pokémon. It wasn't natural. It was a floating *keychain* that could think and feel and often

would sneak up on Grace when she was distracted doing dishes or folding laundry or stripping for the shower and scare the living daylights out of her with that infernal jingle-jangle. Even the garden had become Serena's Fairy sanctuary. Grace would watch her sit out there for hours, doing nothing and saying nothing as Sylveon and Klefki sat with her. There was something out there, something that Grace would never understand.

Calem was still recovering in a private room here in Sycamore's lab, and Grace did not disturb him, not after the night he'd had. Sycamore had sent word to the Lumiose Police Department when Grace had phoned him about what had transpired in Vaniville, and the police sent an emergency convoy to pick up Calem and rush him to Lumiose City.

Four massive Crobat arrived within an hour of Grace's call, lightning fast, and they were roped together to ferry a wide gurney and makeshift work station where the EMTs worked on stabilizing Calem until they could return to Lumiose. Grace had returned to the house to retrieve her Rhyhorn's Pokéball and Fletchling, who refused to be left behind, and then she joined Calem and the EMTs and Klefki, who had not left Calem's side since the attack, and held on for dear life as the four Crobat took to the night skies.

Grace had flown on Pokémon before, years ago, but never like this. The bats were faster than any Flyer she had ever known before, and contrary to her worst fears climbing aboard the airlift transport, they flew smoothly and in perfect sync. If not for the wind, she would not have noticed they were even moving at all. And they were *silent*. Grace was a pleb, and plebs had difficulty training adult Pokémon compared to Tamers. It took years of time and care for a pleb to learn how to work with an adult Pokémon and earn its trust. But the man that had come accompanying the EMTs and commanded the Crobat made it look like a walk in the park. Four fully evolved, *dangerous* Pokémon, and he barely had to say a word to get them to do what he wanted. Grace didn't talk to him or ask. She didn't have to. And anyway, it didn't matter so long as Calem lived.

Calem.

Serena's best friend, but Grace was not born yesterday. The boy was in love with her daughter, plain as day. It was in his eyes when he looked at Serena, in the way he held himself around her. He would not have fought so hard at the risk of his own death for her otherwise. Grace had seen Serena training her Pokémon before. That Altaria

scared her half to death. It had been a cute little cotton ball of a Pokémon when it was still a Swablu, but now it was different. Even a pleb like Grace could *feel* the difference in the air around it. And that Rhydon... Grace and her Rhyhorn had been together since she was a girl. It was an older Pokémon, but the species lived for a century and a half at least. Eventually, Rhyhorn would evolve in its own time. But to see Serena with her Rhydon, a monster that had grown out of the shy Rhyhorn Grace had procured for her to learn how to race... The distance between mother and daughter had never felt so great as the day Rhydon first emerged from its long sleep in its Pokéball, evolved and no longer shy.

But they listened to Serena, kept her safe, fought for her, just as Calem's Pokémon had fought for him last night. And he'd lost one, that Escavalier. Grace had watched the woman's Talonflame pry off his helmet like a can opener. Grace had never been a trainer, like most plebs. She knew the basics, the necessity for self-defense, but she was no fool. Any attempt to intervene on Calem's behalf would have only made her a liability. But even Calem could not defeat that woman, and he was supposed to be one of *them*, one of the gifted ones who could do things Grace never could. And it hadn't been enough. Serena was her *daughter*. She was supposed to protect her, not watch helplessly as a young boy fought a losing battle against an opponent that outclassed him in every imaginable way.

Grace could not understand what it had taken Calem to fight that woman, what it had cost him, and even now she could not help the anger over losing Serena. But there was something Grace did understand, something that transcended the distance between daughter and mother, Tamer and pleb. Something that brought Serena back to her after each visit to Lumiose, something that gave Grace the patience to coexist with her daughter's Fairies, to put up with the loneliness of raising a child by herself. Something that had spurred her to act quickly and phone the one person who might be able to save Calem's life, because she'd already lost her daughter, she was not about to lose the one person who loved her daughter as much as she did. It was that something that drove her to what she was going to do now.

Grace had not bothered to change before boarding the Crobat airlift to Lumiose, and thus she was still in her nightgown and bathrobe and house slippers, hair frazzled, reeking of smoke from Calem's battle with that woman. Nevertheless, she abandoned her place in the lab's cafeteria and the cup of coffee she'd been nursing and stormed into Sycamore's lab.

"Augustine, we need to talk," she said. "Now."

Sycamore was finishing up a conversation with Calem's doctor when Grace burst into his lab unannounced. Under any other circumstances, the uninitiated may have perceived her to be an angry wife confronting her younger husband about his scandalous extramarital affairs and enough was enough, goddamnit. Either way, the good doctor, a greying man with thick spectacles and a rumpled brown suit nodded discreetly to Sycamore and politely excused himself, he would be back later this evening to check on Calem and the nurse would remain in his stead. Some of Sycamore's lab techs and fellow scientists were busy at work at their stations, but they stopped their work to stare at this woman in her nightclothes with the audacity to boss around the boss.

Sycamore clasped his hands together in front of his mouth like he might burst into some kind of religious chant. There were bags under his eyes and worry lines around his mouth. He hadn't slept in nearly thirty-six hours due to the nature of his work and then the emergency with Calem for which he'd dropped everything.

"Grace," Sycamore said at a respectable whisper. "Why don't we talk somewhere more private?"

Grace followed him to a small office on the main lab floor, and Sycamore closed the door so the other lab workers would not be privy to their conversation. Grace paced the office in front of the desk, arms crossed.

"I can't sit around here and do nothing," she said, more to herself than to him. "Someone did this, and I have to find out who."

"Hold on a minute," Sycamore said. "We've all had a long night, Calem especially. I think what's best for everyone right now is to get some rest, yourself included. Then we can think about how to help Serena."

Grace fixed him with a venomous look. "Rest? My baby is out there with that psycho woman doing god knows what and you want me to *rest*?"

Sycamore approached Grace, hands up in a placating gesture, but she backed up and intensified her glare. He stopped short and took a deep breath.

"I understand your frustration. Serena is very important to me, too, and I want to do whatever it takes to find her. Which is why I talked

to Calem a bit this morning when he was awake."

Grace blinked, caught off guard. "He's awake? So he's going to be okay?"

Sycamore smiled a little. "Yes, I think so. Thanks to your quick thinking. Vaniville's clinic didn't have the concentration of Burn Heal he needed. You saved his life when you called me."

She averted her gaze and swallowed the lump in her throat. "I'm glad he's okay."

"He told me a little bit about that woman he fought. He said she was Ignifera, a Fire Tamer. Judging from the severity of his wounds, I'd wager she was an extraordinarily powerful one. I know this is hard to hear, but there's nothing Calem could have done against her alone and unprepared. I imagine that was the point of this planned abduction."

Grace balled her fists under her crossed arms. "I shouldn't have blamed him."

"It's all right. I can't imagine how awful it must have been for you in that situation, and I'm sure Calem understands that, too. I'm sure you didn't mean it."

"Yes, I did mean it," Grace interrupted. "I meant it." She rubbed her tired eyes. "It's the last thing I said to him before he blacked out."

Sycamore was silent a moment. "Well, you can talk to him yourself once he's feeling better tonight."

"Did he say anything else? He didn't know who this woman was?"

"Unfortunately, no. There are many Tamers in the world, and they tend to keep to themselves if they have a choice, as you know. I'm not surprised Calem didn't recognize this woman, although it bothers me that we don't know anything about her when she's this strong." He paused before adding, "Calem did have a theory. Not about the woman, per se, but about the abduction."

"Well?"

Sycamore stuffed his hands in his pockets. "He asked about who else knew about Serena being a Magus. The woman apparently used that word, so she knew the truth."

Grace paled. "Someone betrayed her. Someone close to us told that woman, and she came for Serena."

"Now wait a minute, I didn't say that. Calem was just coming out of heavy sedation when we spoke."

Grace shook her head. "No, he's right, I know it. Someone who already knew about Serena had to divulge her secret. There's no other way anyone would know. You've said yourself how these Magi have been extinct for centuries, so there's no way anyone would be actively looking for one or even recognize the signs unless they knew what to spot."

Sycamore's eyes lost focus for a moment as he considered her words, and she knew she had him.

"Augustine, who knows about Serena? Tell me."

"Aside from the three of us, you remember my old assistant, Alain. You met him a few times. But there's no way it was him. He stopped working for me four years ago and we've been out of contact ever since. I don't even know where he is, if he's even still in Kalos."

"I'll decide who to suspect, thank you," Grace snapped. "Who else?"

"My current assistant, Dexio."

"And where is Dexio? Is he working today?"

"No, we had a very long night that lasted well into yesterday evening, so I gave him today off."

"Well, are you going to bring him in to question him?"

"Question him? He hasn't done anything."

"That you know of. You said this woman knew Serena was a Magus. How could she have known if someone didn't tell her?"

Sycamore sighed. "Look, Grace, I fully understand where you're going with this, and I agree that we should look into it. But I don't think we should jump to conclusions and start pointing fingers. Calem's still recovering, and you need to rest, too. We both do. No one's thinking clearly, and that's not going to help Serena in the long run. You can agree with me on that, right?"

Grace was squeezing her fists so hard that the nails broke the skin on

her palms. The sting of pain had a sobering effect, and she unclenched her jaw. "...Right."

"Then please trust me. I want to find out how this happened just as much as you do. But first, I've arranged for you to have a change of clothes and a room up in the residential quarters. Shower, change, sleep, get something to eat. We'll tackle this together when we're all fresh, you have my word."

Grace's fingers were slick on her palms where the little blood that had escaped seeped in between them and grew sticky. She nodded, not trusting her voice.

"Great, thank you. Come on, please let me show you to the guest room upstairs."

Grace said nothing and let Sycamore lead her to the elevator to the sixth floor, where he showed her into a bedroom that had been made up and recently spruced for her use. There was a change of clothes folded on the bed.

"You'll find everything you need in here," he said, the exhaustion palpable in his voice.

"Thank you, Augustine," Grace said, arms still crossed.

"Okay. I'm heading to my own quarters to get some rest, but you can connect to Shannon, the lab's receptionist, on the X-Transceiver phone by the bed if you need anything. Let's plan to meet in Calem's recovery room at eight tonight. He should be well enough to be up and about by then, according to the doctor."

It was nearly two in the afternoon right now. Grace nodded, and Sycamore excused himself. Once alone, Grace walked around the bed to the phone and picked it up. After a moment, she was connected with the receptionist.

"Reception, how may I direct your call?" a woman said.

"Hi Shannon, this is Jen on the third floor," Grace said smoothly, choosing the most generic name she could in hopes the receptionist would not question her, "and I'm such a bonehead. I'm covering for Dexio today while he's out, you know how Professor Sycamore's got that kid in here just up from Vaniville?"

"Oh, yes—"

"And anyway, I just realized I don't have the password for Dexio's computer here and it's the only place he's got Professor Sycamore's agenda for today. I know, I'm such a space case! And there's this big meeting he's got later tonight and I *really* need the details for him, but I don't want to bother him when he's in the middle of this personal emergency, you know?"

"Oh sure, I understand," Shannon said politely.

"Anyway, would you do me a huge favor and give me Dexio's home address? I've gotta run the laptop over to him so he can unlock it for me."

"His address?"

Grace gnashed her teeth and fisted her bathrobe to keep her temper under control. "Yeah, you know, I don't want to ask him for the password, it's against protocol, so this is the next best thing. Please? I'll just run over there quick and no one'll hear a word about it. He was supposed to send me the agenda and just forgot, so I'd rather not make a huge deal out of it and get him in trouble, too, you know what I mean?"

Shannon laughed. "Oh, I know exactly what you mean. Someone makes one little mistake and suddenly the whole lab knows about it by lunch!"

Grace forced herself to giggle along with Shannon.

"Okay Jen, you got a pen and paper?"

"You bet, ready when you are." She grabbed the pen and paper in the drawer of the nightstand and took down Dexio's address as Shannon read it to her. "Shannon, you're a lifesaver, seriously. I owe you one."

"No problem. Jen, right? I'm so sorry, I try to learn everyone's names, but it's a huge lab."

"No worries. And thanks again. I better get to it before the gossip mill gets wind of this."

"Haha, you got it. Bye now."

Grace slammed down the receiver and ripped off the paper with Dexio's home address. She then hastily changed out of her smelly nightclothes and pulled on the street clothes Sycamore had given her

—jeans, a long sleeved green blouse, and a light grey windbreaker. She stopped in the bathroom to splash water on her face and dampen her hair, run a brush through it quickly, just enough to blend in on the street and not look like she'd been up all night worried sick over her only daughter's sudden abduction. The shower called longingly, but Grace hardly noticed it. Serena needed her right now, and there was nothing more important.

She stuffed the paper with Dexio's address into her jeans pocket next to the two Pokéballs she'd clipped to the belt, slipped on the brown walking shoes by the door, and headed for the elevator. As the doors opened up onto the main floor, Grace put up the hood of her windbreaker and sailed through the lobby. Shannon the receptionist didn't even look up to acknowledge her.

Outside, it was drizzling and the sky was overcast and grey. The storm drains and manholes smoked, and the smell of the city lingered in the air like stale cigarette smoke in a cheap hotel room. Dexio's place was too far to walk to from here, so Grace jumped on the electric trolley that traversed the entire western half of the city. Tiny Magnemite floated over the trolley, feeding it electricity that propelled it along the cables. No one paid her any mind as she rode by herself in silence.

Grace knew the city well. She'd been coming here for years for the races since she was a girl. Dexio lived in the northwest part of the city, about a forty-minute commute by trolley from the lab. It was a young part of the city, where the single and under thirty-five crowd tended to congregate for the cheaper rents, myriad take-out restaurants, and easy access to Central Lumiose where all the trendy cafés and shops were. Grace was very familiar with the area. She'd lived there herself when she was just starting out her career as a racer in her early twenties. She just hoped Dexio would be home.

The trolley stopped at a corner about forty minutes later, and Grace got off with a splash on the sidewalk. The rain had picked up, and the chewed up asphalt and cement were already filling with small puddles that drained into the sewers underground. Grace pulled her hood down lower over her eyes, ignoring the urge to yawn. She probably looked like hell, but she couldn't be bothered to care.

A twenty-four-hour take-out restaurant glowed under a yellow neon sign on the corner of Dexio's street, the emetic smell of deep-fried dough and meat inescapable. A group of young men with gaunt faces and smoking cigarettes paused their conversation to watch her go by, and Grace ignored the crawling sensation of their stares. She was not

as young as she used to be, now in her mid-fifties, but she kept in good shape and had always been on the petite side, and her hood hid her face from view. The men did nothing, but they reminded her of why she'd moved away from this part of town the first chance she got. Grace rested her hand on the Pokéballs at her belt, wondering if it had been them, not her confident gait, that had deterred the sleazy gawkers.

Dexio's apartment was in a brick building with a fire escape zigzagging down the front that completely ruined the façade, but architectural beauty was not the appeal of this neighborhood. Grace walked into the building like she owned the place, dashing discreetly after a woman with a toddler in her arms and holding the door open once the woman buzzed it open.

"Thank you," she mumbled, not even looking at Grace.

Grace said nothing and headed for the stairs while the woman waited for the elevator. Dexio's apartment was on the third floor. As Grace passed other tenants' rooms, she heard the telltale boom of music, the breathy gasps of a couple having sex, a baby crying somewhere. A Meowth stalked the second floor hallway and looked up from its food to eye Grace suspiciously. Grace hurried past it to the third floor and grabbed the two Pokéballs at her belt. Dexio's apartment was at the end of the tiled hallway.

"What am I doing?" she whispered to herself.

She was no trainer, no fighter. She couldn't do what Calem did, what Serena did. She was just some washed up Rhyhorn racer whose best days were long behind her. She was nobody to these people who didn't know her, didn't remember her name. But she was here, she wasn't turning back. Calem had tried, and he probably could not have done any better than if he'd actually given his life, and even then Grace was not convinced that Serena would have been safe. So now it was her turn. Serena was her daughter. She would *not* abandon her, never.

She knocked on Dexio's door. There was some shuffling on the other side.

"Who is it?"

"I'm here with a message from Professor Sycamore," Grace said, raising the pitch of her voice to sound more girlish and disarming.

There was a pause, and she guessed he must be looking at her through the peep hole.

"Who are you?"

"I work with the professor. There's been an emergency at the lab, and he asked me to come and get you."

Another pause. "Today's my day off, and I don't recognize you. If Professor Sycamore wanted to see me, he could have just called."

Maybe it was the compounded stress of the previous night, first with Serena's abduction and then Calem's hospitalization. Maybe she wasn't as patient as she thought she was. Or maybe she was just tired of waiting for things to happen right under her nose in the middle of the night and it was too late for her to save her little girl, as a child and now as a young woman. Either way, in a split second of either total insanity or calculated courage, Grace tossed out her two Pokéballs right there. Fletchling squawked and Rhyhorn looked around, its cautious gaze wary.

"Hey, what're you doing out there?" Dexio demanded. "I'm calling the cops!"

"Rhyhorn, knock down that door!" Grace said.

Rhyhorn eyed her like it didn't recognize her. Grace very rarely ordered it to use attacks.

"Bulldoze, now!" she commanded.

Rhyhorn got the message real quick. It lined itself up with the door, lowered its head, and charged. Grace, Fletchling on her shoulder, backed up and shielded her face as the door exploded under Rhyhorn's brute strength. Grace stared in shock for a second, incredulous that her trusted Rhyhorn with whom she'd shared more than half her life could break down a dead bolted door with such ease. Rhyhorn waddled into the apartment, and Grace remembered herself. She jogged after the bulky rhino and squeezed in behind it.

Dexio's apartment was neither particularly clean nor messy. Evidence of his well-paying job was all over the place in his plush leather couch, a collection of vintage records, a beautiful hand-woven rug on the floor. Dexio himself had retreated to the bedroom, presumably to phone the cops. Grace ran in after him.

"Fletchling, Peck!" she ordered.

The little bird tweeted fiercely and flew at Dexio just as he was dialing. It drove its little beak into his hand, piercing skin and muscle and spraying blood all over the white pillow on his bed. Dexio cried out in pain and clutched his hand, dropping the receiver. Frantic brown eyes found Grace, and he scrambled backwards on his bed away from her as she stalked toward him.

"What the fuck, lady! Get away from me!"

Rhyhorn lumbered in after Grace, but its wide frame was a little too big for the door and it chipped the sides. Plaster, wood, and insulation came apart around it as it pushed into the room after Grace. Dexio watched it like it was an axe murderer come to kill him in his sleep.

"My name is Grace Gabena," Grace said, her rage tingling in her fingers. "You know my daughter, Serena."

"S-Serena..." Dexio seemed to rack his mind to put a face to the name. "Y-Yeah, I know her, so what?"

Grace advanced. "She was kidnapped last night by a woman, an Ignifera. I saw her with my own eyes. She knew about Serena's gift."

Dexio's eyes flashed and his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. He was sweating, his blond bangs plastered to his forehead and blood from the flesh wound on his hand smeared on his cheek. "Malva kidnapped her?"

Grace could not contain her rage any longer and she threw herself at him. Dexio screamed and tried to bat her away, but Grace was strong and in shape despite her exhaustion. She grabbed his wrists and pressed her thumb into the Peck wound on his hand, and Dexio whimpered.

"So you know her!" she hissed. "You're the one who told this Malva about my daughter, aren't you? Answer me!"

"I-I don't know! I didn't know!"

"Not good enough! Rhyhorn, get over here!"

Rhyhorn lumbered into the room to the foot of the bed, and Dexio squirmed.

"No, please! Wait! C-Call that thing off, please!"

"Answer my question," Grace said through gritted teeth. "Did you tell Malva about Serena? Did you tell her she's a Magus?"

Dexio's eyes watered with tears. "Yes."

Grace tightened her grip on his wrists, and Fletchling tweeted angrily. Its beak was splashed with Dexio's blood.

"Where is she taking Serena?"

"I don't know, I swear! I had no idea she'd kidnap her! You gotta believe me, please!"

"Why should I?"

Fletchling hopped from Grace's shoulder to Dexio's, its head twitching, and he winced.

"It's the truth, I swear! She just wanted to know about Serena, where she lived, that stuff. She didn't tell me why, just that Serena was important for some project she was working on. That's all I know, I swear. Oh god, please don't kill me!"

Grace could not believe her ears. "Why the hell would you tell *anyone* about Serena? Have you told anyone else?"

"No, just Malva, I swear! Sh-She paid me. She paid a lot, that's the only reason. Oh god, I swear I had no idea she'd kidnap her, please believe me. Oh god..."

He was sobbing outright now, and Grace could not stand to look at him any longer. She threw him down onto the bed and got up. Fletchling hopped after her, tweeting, and Rhyhorn looked up at her, its small eyes ever cautious. Grace's vision blurred with tears and she raised a hand to cover her face as a sob of her own racked her body.

"Please don't kill me," Dexio pleaded with her, still cowering on his bed in fear of Rhyhorn. "I swear I didn't mean for it to happen like this. I always liked Serena."

Grace whirled on him. "Shut up, you don't get to say her name!" She sniffled and wiped her eyes with her sleeves, thoughts racing. "I'm not going to kill you."

"You're not?"

"No. You're coming back to the lab with me. And I'll let Calem decide if he wants to kill you. He deserves it after that woman killed his Pokémon."

Dexio shivered and cried, holding his head in his hands, and Grace was finding it hard to hold on to her rage. He was too pathetic, sniveling like a coward, not the face of the villain she'd come here looking for. She sniffled again and smelled something musty, faint but pungent, and realized he must have soiled himself when she came after him like a harpy.

"Get up, Dexio," Grace said, not quite recognizing her own voice. "You're going to tell Sycamore and Calem what you just told me, and then you're going to help me find my daughter."

The doctor gently lowered the slings elevating Calem's arms and unhooked them from the pulleys. He'd drained four full IV bags of Burn Heal and was slowly working his way through the fifth, but he felt comparatively better than he had this morning. His arms throbbed, but the pain was manageable. His left hand was mending with the help of a Hyper Potion the doctor had injected directly into his wrist and would be functional again in a matter of days, possibly even by tomorrow night.

But the doctor had warned him that he would not make a full recovery. He may never regain full range of motion in his left hand, which meant no more punching with it. That was okay, Calem said, his left hand was his shield hand, which was how he reassured himself in private over and over again thereafter. He would also have scars. Terrible scars on his forearms. They would reach deep into his shredded muscle tissue, wrap around his arm in the shape of a messy handprint, and no amount of Hyper Potions would ever erase them or the damage they did. They would be a part of him, forever.

"You'll find yourself physically weaker," the doctor warned. "The burns fried your arm muscles and touched your bones, and that will take time to recover. Physical therapy will help, but you may not see results for months even with constant work. It will also affect how you wield that Aegislash for the rest of your life. You won't be able to support weight the way you always have."

"I understand," Calem mumbled. He just wanted to get out of this bed and feel like a regular person again. The rest, he could deal with later.

The doctor looked at him pointedly, but he didn't argue. "Very well, son. I think you should get up, try walking around a little, eat something. Professor Sycamore said he would meet you here at eight, and it's about five till."

"Okay. Thanks, Doctor."

The doctor nodded. "You've been through an ordeal. Frankly, it's a miracle you survived. If Ms. Gabena had called any later, you may not have made it."

"*Why didn't you stop her?!*"

Calem averted his gaze as Grace's painful words echoed in his memory, ashamed. "...Yeah."

The doctor smiled warmly. "Remember to rest. You'll be back to your old self in no time."

He let himself out of the room where the nurse was waiting, and the two of them headed for the elevator. Calem stood there for a long moment, the door ajar and looking out onto the fourth floor, Sycamore's private lab and residence. Klefki floated next to Calem's ear and chimed softly, perhaps sensing his mood.

"It's not me I'm worried about," he confided to the tiny Fairy.

Klefki's jewel heart pulsed softly, its usual spritely jingling absent and making the silence here seem much more profound. Calem raised his arms at the elbow. They were both heavily bandaged, pristine white, but he knew they'd been changed regularly throughout the day while he slept to accommodate the mucous discharge created when the Burn Heal interacted with the burn site. His left hand was nothing but a stump, completely wrapped up in white. An IV tube was taped to his left arm at the elbow joint just above the bandages and connected to the bag of Burn Heal in the IV stand, which Calem dragged alongside him when he left the room. He still had a bandage over the left side of his face, but it no longer itched and burned.

He didn't get far when Sycamore appeared down the hall through one of the side doors. He'd changed his clothes and looked like he'd caught a few hours of sleep. Clean shaven and his dark dreads pulled back in a low ponytail, Sycamore's smile felt warm enough when he caught sight of Calem up and about.

"Calem, it's good to see you up," Sycamore said as he jogged to greet

him.

"Yeah. Just wish I had some pants. It's kinda cold in here."

Sycamore laughed, noticing Calem's thin hospital gown and bare legs under it. He even wore paper slippers.

"Sorry about that. The nurse is staying the night with us, and she said whenever you're ready, she'll help you get cleaned up."

"Uh, what's that mean?"

"Ever heard of a sponge bath?"

Calem paled, and Sycamore laughed again.

"Look at it this way. It's not every day you get a nurse to dab you clean with a sponge."

"Thanks, that's totally *not* creepy."

Sycamore had lost his lab coat and wore dark slacks and a navy button down, but his prayer beads and woven bracelets adorned him like talismans, as always. "Well, how about some dinner? You must be starving."

They headed to the elevator and Sycamore pressed the button.

"It's late, so just about everyone's gone home. We should have the cafeteria to ourselves." He checked his watch. "Grace was supposed to meet us here at eight, but I see we're already about fifteen minutes behind. Oh well, she's probably still sleeping. I'll have my receptionist give her a call."

Sycamore prattled on, but Calem barely heard him. All he could think about was the woman, the Ignifera, and how easily he'd been tossed aside. Klefki read his mood and squeaked pitifully, almost sad.

The elevator dinged and Calem moved to get in, but just then Sycamore's mobile X-Transceiver buzzed in his pants pocket. He answered it while Calem held the door.

"Yes? Oh, hello, Shannon. Why are you calling me on my mobile?" He paused, and Calem could hear the shrill voice on the other side, panicked, and he strained to listen. "O-Okay, slow down. Who's in the lobby? ...What do you mean she has Dexio? A Rhyhorn?" The shrill voice was spewing a mile a minute on the other side, and Sycamore

licked his lips. "Yes, okay, I heard you the first time! Just stay there, make sure no one leaves. I'm coming down."

He flipped the phone closed and stepped into the elevator after Calem.

"What's going on?" Calem said as Sycamore punched the button for the main floor.

"It's Grace. Apparently, she stormed into the lab with Dexio and her Rhyhorn, and she demanded I come down."

"Dexio? Your assistant?" Calem narrowed his eyes. "What happened while I was out?"

Sycamore shook his head. "I don't know, but I've got a bad feeling about it."

The elevator opened and Sycamore jogged toward the main entrance. Calem followed at a more sedate pace, still weak from the inundation of drugs in his system, and Klefki jingled excitedly as it buzzed around his head in circles.

When Calem arrived in the lobby, he was shocked to find Grace standing there with Dexio, his hands behind his back where she held him like a jailer holds a prisoner. She was disheveled and wet from the rain, but Dexio looked worse with his bleeding hand and bloodstained shirt. He as in his pajamas, yellow and blue striped and muddy at the ankles. Her Rhyhorn, which Calem had met several times, stood behind her. It was an impressive specimen, larger than most Rhyhorn due to its age, and came up to her chest at the shoulder. Fletchling squawked angrily from its perch on Rhyhorn's head, and Shannon the receptionist cowered behind her desk.

"What's going on here?" Sycamore demanded.

Grace shoved Dexio hard and he fell on the floor on his hands and knees, shaking like a leaf. "Tell them," she said, her voice booming like Calem had never heard it. "Tell them what you told me."

Dexio sobbed on the floor, still shaking, and curled in on himself.

"Fletchling, go wake him up."

Fletchling squawked and swooped down onto Dexio's back, and he immediately fell onto his side, cowering from the tiny bird. He covered his face with his hands and sobbed louder.

"Please, stop! I said I was sorry!"

"What's the meaning of this?" Sycamore said, kneeling down to give Dexio a hand. "Grace, I think you had better explain yourself because it looks like you've assaulted my employee."

Dexio clung to Sycamore's arm and continued to sob.

Grace, however, was unmoved. "Dexio, if you don't start talking now, I'm going to. Remember what I told you at your apartment."

Calem watched, confused and more than a little surprised at this transformed Grace he'd never seen before. Dexio's eyes swiveled and found him watching, wide and fearful, and something turned in Calem's stomach. Why was Dexio looking at him? What was going on?

"Oh god," Dexio wailed, "I swear I didn't know she'd kidnap her, you gotta believe me! I'm so sorry!"

All the blood left Calem's head and pooled in his weakened fists. He clenched his right hand without thinking as he began to understand what was happening.

"What did you just say?" Sycamore said, forcing Dexio to sit up properly. "Dexio, answer me."

Dexio's nose was leaking snot and his eyes were puffy from crying. Thirty-six years old and he had no qualms about falling apart in front of his boss and patron.

"Professor, y-you gotta believe me, okay, I swear I had no idea Malva would kidnap her. I thought she just wanted to know about Serena, and she paid good money and she was real discreet."

"What did you say?" Calem said, stepping forward. "That woman *paid* you to sell out Serena?"

Dexio whimpered and tried to scramble away from Calem.

"Malva? That was the woman?" Sycamore pressed.

"He betrayed Serena," Grace said, tearing up and shaking. "He said that woman, Malva, she's the one who took Serena for some project. He said he didn't know anything else, but I don't believe him."

"Son of a bitch," Sycamore swore, shaking his head in disbelief. "Dexio, how could you do this?"

"Professor, I'm so sorry!" Dexio wailed. "I needed the money!"

"If you needed money, you could have come to me!"

Calem had heard enough. He advanced on Dexio and before the simpering assistant could process what was happening, Calem swung out with his foot and smashed it into Dexio's face. He crashed to the floor on his back, convulsing from the shock and pain, and Calem towered over him. Klefki jingled angrily down at Dexio, whose nose had cracked and was beginning to bleed all over the place.

"Dexio," Calem said under his breath, "if you apologize one more time, I'll smash your whole skull next time."

Dexio whimpered but said nothing as he groped at his shattered nose and tried to staunch the bleeding.

"You're gonna tell us everything," Calem went on. "I want to know everything you said to Malva. I want to know everything you know about her and everything you think you know."

Dexio shook his head frantically, his tears mixing with his blood. Grace looked on with her Rhyhorn, silent, and Shannon looked on in horror from behind her desk, her hands clasped over her mouth to keep herself from screaming.

"And I swear to *you*." Calem put his foot, slick with Dexio's blood, over his chest and pressed down. "If anything happens to Serena, I'll break every bone in your body with my bare hands and make sure you're awake while I do it. Do you understand?"

Dexio was racked with a fresh wave of sobs but managed a weak nod, too afraid to speak. Sycamore hung his head in his hands and sighed deeply, suddenly exhausted. Calem gritted his teeth so hard they hurt, and his visible right eye began to water.

When he looked up, he found Grace watching him with a look he'd never seen on her before, somewhere between grief and pain and a little relief. He swallowed hard and nodded to her, a silent understand passing in between them.

By then, lab security had shown up and waited for Sycamore to give them instructions. He did so now, indicating that they should collect Dexio and bring him to the fourth floor for immediate medical attention, after which time he wanted to question him. Two men in black uniforms hauled Dexio to his feet and headed for the elevator.

Sycamore approached Grace and spoke in hushed tones, but Calem tuned them out as he watched Dexio, head hanging, wait in the elevator as the doors closed. Klefki floated next to him, and he could almost feel the waves of resentment flowing from it.

"I'll find her," he whispered. "I swear I will."

6. Chapter 6

Wanderer
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

The next two days at the Tower of Mastery after Korrina had divulged her history to Alain were the longest, most agonizing days of his life here thus far. Not much had changed—he still woke up at the crack of dawn, still pushed his body beyond its limits, still fell on his ass in the ring with Korrina—and yet everything had changed. Maybe he'd been going through the motions for so long here that the monotony had dulled his sense of time and space. It was easy to get caught up in the routine and work on autopilot, especially once his body acclimated to the rigorous workouts Korrina put him through after that first grueling month.

Now, his eyes were open, as though a veil had been lifted. He looked in the mirror and he saw a person he hardly recognized. Physically, he was in peak condition and better off perhaps than he'd ever been. The scars remained, but they curved around the dips in his restored musculature, pinched together to make room. Gone were the bags under his eyes, the gauntness in his cheeks, the vacant stare in his eyes that had lost the ability to focus when he left Lumiose. Shadows of his old life remained, and they visited him during the night when sleep avoided him like the plague, screaming and crying and giving him no respite.

But the guilt that shackled him like a ball and chain had become easier to drag around. He hadn't fixed the mess he'd made in Lumiose. He'd never outrun the past he'd left behind in the graves of his parents. And yet, the urge to run was gone. Looking back at the last several months, the weight of Korrina as she pinned him in a chokehold with his own arms and her knee pressed to his stomach, he realized he hadn't been running since he got here. There was no reason to leave.

"Well, if nothing else," Korrina said just inches from his face, a little out of breath, "the sight of you from this angle's starting to grow on me."

"If you wanted me on my back, you coulda just asked," he teased.

She hesitated, searched his eyes, and he took the opportunity hook his leg around her knee and flip them in a move Mack had taught him a

couple weeks ago out of pure pity at seeing Alain get knocked down so often. It worked now, and in the blink of an eye, Korrina was on her back on the mat in Training Room Eight, her arms tangled up with Alain's as she maintained her chokehold.

Korrina's expression warped with shock and surprise and (dare he say!) a flicker of admiration, but before she could rip him a new one for pulling a fast one on her, Alain braved her chokehold and caught her in a kiss that had the unintended effect of loosening her hold on him. Her body slackened, and he took the opportunity to run his palm down the side of her. Her pink tank top had ridden up over her midriff, and they were both covered in the heat and sweat of their workout, but for a couple seconds he forgot all about it.

She curled her fingers in his shirt, bunching the sleeves, and there was a moment there when he could not remember his own name. Her breath hitched and he felt her chest expand, pressing closer, and he was ready to fall apart right there. About four seconds into the blissful oblivion that emanated from the electric heat of her skin under his palm, Korrina suddenly tensed. Alain was too slow to react in time, and before he knew it he was on his side, bodily thrown off, and Korrina was scrambling to her feet.

The door swung open and Gurkinn poked his head in. "Everything going well today?"

"Fine, just fine," Korrina said as she adjusted the hem of her top.

Alain groaned on the mat and rolled over onto his back. "Yeah, peachy."

Gurkinn smiled warmly. "Great. I just wanted to let you two know that I won't be joining you for dinner tonight. I have business in town, and I'll be back later."

"No problem, Grandpa," Korrina said.

Gurkinn nodded and let the door swing gently closed behind him. Alain watched him upside-down as the old man walked away through the glass.

"Dude, what is it about your gramps that makes me feel like a fucking teenager?"

Korrina kneeled down next to him and brushed his bangs out of his face. "I dunno, *dude*. Maybe the 360-degree view has something to do

with it."

He sat up on his elbows and looked up at her. The ghost of a smile tugged at her lips, stretching the scar on her upper lip just enough to notice. "Creepy as that is, somehow I just don't give a shit."

"Well, *I* care. I'm a Gym Leader, you know."

"Tell me about it. I'm embarrassed to be seen with you."

Korrina laughed as she stood up. "Cute doesn't suit you at all, Titan."

Alain held out his hand for her. "Hey, I got you to smile, didn't I?"

She eyed his reaching hand and hesitated. "Alain..."

"Aw, c'mon, I'm not gonna pull you down when you're expecting it."

"You're predictable," she countered.

"No way, I'm mysterious and handsome from every angle."

Korrina rolled her eyes. "Oh, *please*."

He waggled his fingers at her, a silent plea. Sighing, Korrina took his hand and pulled, but he shot up with his other hand and overpowered her before she could retaliate. They landed together on the mat on their sides, and Alain burst out laughing.

"Oh my *god*!" Korrina shrieked. "You ass!"

Alain laughed and laughed, and he had her by the waist as he held on. Korrina pushed on his chest to get away, but her efforts were weak and wanting. Alain slowly calmed down and regained his breath. There were tears in his eyes, but he blinked them away and found her watching him.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey."

"It's not so bad down here."

Slowly, and if he hadn't been watching intently he would have missed it completely, Korrina's eyes softened and she smiled the way she did when she thanked him for trusting her with his deepest secret.

"No, it's not," she agreed.

Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. What about everything that came after? At evenfall on those sleepless nights, he was still drifting somewhere, destination unknown. But come dawn, there was Korrina and her barbaric training sessions and the sweat and the mat and sometimes, oftentimes, if he looked carefully, there was this. And nothing, not the promise of a thousand nights' dreamless sleep, could compare.

"C'mon," she said, pushing up on one elbow. "Let's go another round. And for the record, I knew you were going to pull me down."

She got up and Alain rolled into a sitting position. "Oh, really? Then why'd you let me?"

"'Cause I'm such a kind and generous soul."

"Oh, *please*."

"What? What're you gonna do about it?" She eased into a fighting stance.

Alain got to his feet, re-energized. "I'm gonna kick your ass."

Korrina smirked, and he nearly gave up right there as his prurient imagination took over.

"Hah! Enough of your lies, Titan," she challenged.

With no time to indulge in fantasy, Alain threw up his hands in a block as Korrina flew at him, and he fell into step with her.

A medic employed at the lab patched Dexio up after the beating he'd taken from Calem, but Dexio's face was splotched black and blue under ugly, red scars of dried blood. His nose was lumpy where the medic did his best to reshape it, but it would take a Hyper Potion or two to fix the shattered bones in Dexio's face. Dexio had passed out from the pain, and he had been out cold since.

That was hours ago, and it was now a little after midnight. Grace still had not slept a wink, and she was on her third cup of coffee. Sycamore had ceased his protests since she returned to the lab with Dexio in tow, and his silence unnerved Grace. He pulled off the image of the unflappable, patient professor well, but this dark solemnity that

had possessed him for the past few hours revealed a deep vein of ice underneath the layers of prayer beads and peace bracelets.

Grace did not speak to him as she paced the corridor of the medical ward. Sycamore sat hunched over his knees in a nondescript, grey chair next to a potted Bromeliad flowering a brilliant red and stared at the spot where the floor met the wall, deep in troubled thought. Calem had gone back to his bed at the end of the hall to rest, which meant chugging a Hyper Potion against the nurse's orders and waiting for it to stitch him back together faster than the Burn Heal was doing. No one spoke.

Finally, at about a quarter to one in the morning, the medic opened the door to Dexio's room and announced that he'd finally come to. Sycamore stood up and Grace downed the rest of her coffee, but before she could make her way to the door, Calem was pounding down the hall from his room with Klefki hot on his heels. He dragged the IV stand feeding him Burn Heal, but the bandage on his face was gone. The wound was healing quickly under the effects of the Hyper Potion, but the wound was still shredded and tender as new, pink skin sealed it up. His left eye was bloodshot, and he had the appearance of a demon marching to feast on an unwitting soul all dressed in white and pale with that lone, bloody eye.

"Is he talking?" Sycamore asked the medic.

"He will be," Calem interrupted.

The medic stepped aside for Calem, unwilling to get in his way and aggravate his injuries. Grace followed him in, and Sycamore was right behind her. Dexio was lying prostrate on a gurney in a hospital gown matching Calem's. His face was swollen and hardly recognizable, and his eyes were glassy and unfocused. But as soon as he saw Calem approaching the side of his bed, he jerked and scrambled into a sitting position.

"W-What do you want now? I told you everything I know!"

"Calm down, Dexio," Sycamore said, a hint of his famous patience in his tone. "We're going to ask you some questions."

The disarming note in Sycamore's voice did little to assuage Dexio, and his swollen eyes darted between his three unwelcome visitors.

"And then what?" Dexio said. "You send me to prison? Beat me some more?" His gaze narrowed at Calem, who returned it with icy calm.

"Depends on whether you tell the truth or not," Calem said.

Klefki jingled next to him and squeaked angrily down at Dexio, who shied away from the odd Pokémon.

"Gym Leader Clemont will decide your fate," Sycamore said, "after I explain to him how you've aided and abetted the kidnapping of my ward."

Dexio swallowed hard. Clemont was even younger than Calem and Serena, Grace recalled. He'd taken over as Gym Leader when he was just fifteen, but he was lauded throughout Kalos as a technical genius. He was responsible for Lumiose City's power grid—the entire city was powered by an army of Electric Pokémon that lived at the Gym in the city center. They were the reason X-Transceiver technology, still a relatively new invention from Virbank City in distant Unova, was wired all over Lumiose and its closest neighboring territories, including Santalune and Vaniville, making bird messengers in this small part of Kalos virtually obsolete. Clemont's ingenuity had also freed Lumiose from its previous dependence upon coal and natural gas previously used to power its public transportation system and imported from Dendemille and distant Hoenn (and relieved its coffers of the sizeable expense in the process).

But aside from his genius, Clemont was widely known as a Fulmen whose talent was recognized even by Champion Diantha, who'd come to Lumiose personally to show her support for his succession despite his extreme youth at the time. Grace had never met Clemont, of course, and she was glad of it. He was described as a sociopath and a misanthrope with more in common with his machines than with people. He rarely concerned himself with Lumiose City's governance, relying on the mayor to run the city in his stead, except in the matter of capital punishment. For that, he and his Electric Pokémon were the pitiless executioners. The city penitentiary was located in the bowels of the Lumiose Gym in Prism Tower, but it never remained full for long. Clemont was nothing if not efficient.

"Professor, please, I'm so sorry. I never meant for this to happen," Dexio said, voice hoarse and shaky on the verge of tears. "You have to believe me."

Grace advanced on Dexio and grabbed him by the collar of his hospital gown. "If you're so sorry, then tell me where that woman took my daughter!"

Dexio whimpered and shriveled up like a weed wilting under a harsh frost. "I-I don't know! Honest, I don't know!"

Klefki got in Dexio's face and jingled ferociously. Its silver arms and the keys it carried began to glow with a faint, silvery light. Grace let up and eyed the odd Fairy warily.

"What's he doing?" Dexio said. "H-Hey, stop that!"

Calem watched the scene unfold impassively. "Klefki's a Fairy, and Fairies can always tell when someone's lying. Klefki can see it in your heartstrings—your fear. That glow means he's getting ready to use Flash Cannon. Klefki's small, but one word from me and at this range, that Flash Cannon'll melt your face to the bone."

"Calem," Sycamore said, the warning evident in his tone.

Dexio sank deeper into his pillow in an effort to put distance between Klefki and himself. "No s-stop, please! I don't want to die!"

"I didn't want to see my best friend get abducted and nearly have my arms burned off!" Calem spat. "But we don't always get what we want."

Dexio was sobbing openly now, his wet eyes wide and glistening as they reflected Klefki's silver sheen. "All right! All right, I-I'll talk, I'll tell you everything I know! Oh god, just please get that thing away from me!"

"I don't believe you. Klefki, go ahead."

Klefki's keys vibrated as it focused its energy, and its jeweled heart pulsed in rhythm—three, two, one.

"She said something about Mega Evolution!" Dexio sobbed.

Sycamore went slack-jawed, and Calem put out his hand. Immediately, Klefki powered down and turned to peer at him. Dexio was shaking like a leaf and looked so small swaddled in white. A foul odor wafted in the air, and Grace realized he'd soiled himself for the second time since she found him. Against her better judgment, a part of her felt sorry for him. She had never seen this side of Serena's facetious best friend, or of the tiny Klefki, for that matter. Calem, Gym Leader Clemont, even Serena. Theirs was a world beyond Grace's reach, and it was as dark and ugly as it could be mystifying and magical. Would he have done it? Would Calem have allowed Klefki to

attack an unarmed man? Would he kill so easily? Would Serena?

Something told her Sycamore's train of thought was not far off from hers as he rubbed his mouth to hide his shock and disgust, but whether at Calem or at Dexio, she could not be totally sure.

"Mega Evolution?" Calem said as Klefki hovered back to him, its beady black eyes still trained on Dexio.

Dexio closed his eyes and let his tears stream in silence. His lower lip quivered, his shoulders hunched and exposed his collarbone. He was broken. "Yes."

Sycamore found his voice and slipped past Grace to stand on the side of the gurney opposite Calem. He put a hand on Dexio's shoulder and softened his gaze. "Dexio, tell me exactly what happened. How did Malva know to come to you about Serena? What did she say about Mega Evolution?"

Dexio latched onto Sycamore's small gesture of kindness and curled toward him. Calem met Grace's gaze and nodded, and it took everything she had not to avert her gaze or shy away.

"I'm s-so sorry, Professor," Dexio wept, sniffling.

Sycamore patted his head. "It's all right. You made a mistake, I understand that. But if you tell us what you know, that will go a long way to make up for it."

Dexio looked up at him with wide, dewy eyes, and this time Grace did look away. Nothing Dexio said would absolve him of this, and everyone knew it. She could almost hear the lies he was telling himself that this would all be okay, that he'd go back to his life after all this was over, anything to move beyond the possibility of his death by mutilation standing just inches away on the other side of the bed.

"Malva, she—" he began, trying to control the quake in his voice. "She knew about Serena. I mean, about a M-Magus. That's why she came to me."

"How did she know?"

Dexio blinked and looked down, ashamed. "I told... I mean, I talk a little when I've had a few drinks, and I was with a woman, t-took her to *Le Chalet*, that romantic place, you kn-know it?"

"You told a stranger about Serena?" Grace said, aghast. "Are you out of your goddamned mind?!"

"I w-wanted to impress her. I'm so sorry," Dexio wept. "It's a cozy place, you can hear other tables nearby. Malva, she... She must've overheard, 'cause she came to me with cash wanting to know more about the Magus."

"Unbelievable," Calem said, eerily quiet. "You ran your mouth and now anyone could know about her."

"You mentioned Mega Evolution," Sycamore pressed before Calem could spook Dexio again. "What did she say about that?"

"N-Not much," Dexio admitted. "I just asked her why she'd pay me so much for a little useless information, and sh-she said something about how she was helping with s-some project to learn more about Mega Evolution, I don't know, really. She was vague. I just remember she wasn't leaving until I t-told her about Serena, where she lived, any family or friends, that s-sort of thing. But honest, that's all I know. Please, please believe me. I had no idea sh-she'd kidnap her. She didn't seem like the type."

Sycamore looked up at Calem. "Well?"

Klefki hovered silently next to Calem, calmed. "Looks like he's telling the truth this time."

Grace shook her head. "No, you haven't told us where this Malva took my daughter."

"He doesn't know, Grace," Sycamore said. "From everything you and Calem have told me, it sounds like this woman knew what she was doing. She would not have let that kind of information slip if the goal was only to extract information from Dexio."

"Please," Dexio whispered.

Sycamore released him and wiped his nose. The smell was starting to become uncomfortable. "That's enough for tonight. Dexio, you're not going anywhere, so I suggest you get yourself cleaned up and comfortable here."

He jerked his head toward the door, and Calem followed him out. Grace cast one last, hollow look down at Dexio, who could not even look at her as he continued to sob pitifully. Outside, Grace closed the

door to Dexio's room and followed Sycamore, Calem, and Klefki down the hall a short ways to Sycamore's personal lab, where he powered up a desktop and sat down.

"What's this about Mega Evolution?" Calem pressed. "You've been studying it a lot lately, right?"

"That's right," Sycamore said, a little distracted as the computer's home screen flashed and he began clicking through a series of folders. "It's a type of evolution, for lack of a better word, that some fully-evolved Pokémon are able to attain with the help of a Tamer partner."

"What does this have to do with finding my daughter?" Grace asked.

"If my hunch is right, possibly everything."

"How? What does this Mega Evolution have to do with Serena?"

Sycamore found the file he was looking for and let out a sharp breath as he scanned the contents. Grace tried to read over his shoulder, but he scrolled quickly and it was hard to follow. Near the bottom of the screen there was a picture of a woman with dyed magenta hair in a suit against a vanilla background. Grace gasped.

"That's her," she said. "That's the woman who took Serena."

"You know her?" Calem said, the edge in his tone not lost on the others.

"No, but I accessed the Lumiose Police Department's records to see if anything came up. And it looks like I got lucky."

Grace frowned. "You 'accessed' a proprietary database?"

"I know I may not look it, but I'm actually quite adept with computers," Sycamore said almost amiably. "It looks like Malva's in their database due to some kind of workplace harassment complaint..."

"...And?" Calem pressed.

"This is unexpected," Sycamore said as he scanned the report. "It looks like she's an employee of an organization known as Team Flare. And her boss..."

"Augustine, *what*?" Grace said, exasperated.

Sycamore leaned back in his chair and rubbed his mouth. "I've had

several encounters with Team Flare in the past. Its president, Malva's boss, is a man named Lysandre. He's, well, let's just say we haven't seen eye to eye in the past."

"So that's our guy," Calem said. "He'll know where Malva is."

"No, I don't think it's that simple. Lysandre's methods are...objectionable, but he's not a criminal. I don't know if you're familiar with Team Flare, but they're a large and wealthy conglomerate that dabbles in everything from management consulting to Pokémon research. The thing is, I met Lysandre when he was in the midst of a research project involving Mega Evolution. My former assistant, Alain, was working closely with him."

Calem bared his teeth. "I knew it. Alain's in on this, too."

Sycamore put his hand up. "Now wait a minute, I never said that. And the last time I saw Alain, he was getting ready to leave his employment with Team Flare. That was almost a year ago, and I have no idea where he is or what he's been doing. And besides, that's not the point. What I'm trying to say is that Lysandre, if he's Malva's employer, might know where we can find her. This police report," he pointed to the screen, "was filed by Lysandre against Malva. It says he complained about her physically assaulting him and threatening further violence after he suspended her from active duty about five years ago. He ended up not pressing charges, but the police report was filed."

Grace rubbed her temples. "I don't care about any of this. Can we find Serena with this information or not?"

Sycamore stared at the screen. Malva's picture glared back at him. "I don't know. But this is a place to start. I'll head to Lysandre's office first thing in the morning."

"I'm coming with you," Calem said.

"So am I," Grace said.

"No, this is one trip I should make alone. Calem, you need to recover, and the last message I want to send is one of hostility. Frankly, you need to get yourself under control."

"Professor—"

"I said no, Calem. That's the last I'll hear about it."

"You can't order me to stay here," Grace said. "I'm coming with you."

Sycamore sighed. "Fine, but you have to stay silent. We can't let Lysandre or anyone else know why we're there or what's going on. He can't be trusted."

"Anyone associated with that woman can't be trusted, as far as I'm concerned."

"Then it's settled."

Calem looked like he wanted to protest, but he wisely kept his mouth shut. Klefki floated around his head like a concerned mother, but he ignored the little Pokémon, lost in thought.

"Tomorrow, then," Grace said.

Malva's grainy picture stared back at her, red eyes half-lidded and smoldering, as if to say, 'Catch me if you can.'

Despite her exhaustion, Grace tossed and turned in bed and hardly slept a wink in the four and a half hours she had before she was due to rendezvous with Sycamore in the morning. Nevertheless, she woke feeling alert and quickly showered, grabbed a banana to go, and waited in the lobby. Sycamore looked as haggard as she felt, but there was a glint of acuity in his dark eyes the betrayed his hyper vigilance given the circumstances. He wore street clothes, which made him look more his age than the starchy lab coat he usually sported, and a brown leather jacket hid the many beads and bracelets he wore on his arms. He'd tied his dreads back in a low ponytail, as tasteful as he was like to get.

"Let's go. I've already called us a cab," he said, not bothering to stop and chat as he blew past her and headed out the automatic glass doors.

The small electric car drove almost silently through the edges of the suburbs and into downtown Lumiose, and Sycamore remained silent the entire ride. In the distance, beyond the shops and office buildings and the murky sky, Grace could make out the tall Gym tower in the heart of the city. She thought of Dexio and what would happen to him after this, wondering how Clemont would deal with him. But before she had time to dwell on the macabre thought, the cab pulled up in front of a sleek, glass building and Sycamore passed a few bills to the driver. Grace got out and waited on the steps for Sycamore.

"Let me do all the talking," he said as they convened just outside what Grace presumed to be Team Flare's headquarters. "No matter what happens, even if nothing comes of this, it's important that we don't give Lysandre any reason to suspect our true motive."

"I just want to find Serena. I'll do whatever it takes."

Sycamore studied her. "I want to find her as much as you do, I hope you believe that."

Grace pressed her lips together, and then finally nodded. "I believe you."

"I suspect we won't get anything out of Lysandre. I know that's not what you want to hear." He put up a hand to preempt any protest. "But I'm hoping he'll give something away. Even if it means he's totally in the dark about Malva, that can tell us something. So please, follow my lead."

"I heard you the first time, Augustine. I'm not Calem."

He didn't look convinced, but he nodded regardless. "Good, all right. Let's get to it, then."

They headed inside, whereby Sycamore spoke with the receptionist in hushed tones. Grace glanced around the lobby with disinterest. There was nothing remarkable about it outside the fact that it was elegantly furnished and maintained. This Team Flare, whoever they were, wanted to make an impression. The question was what impression they were going for.

"He'll see us," Sycamore said after several minutes.

The receptionist buzzed them into the building, where a security officer was waiting to lead them to an elevator. Grace hardly noticed her surroundings, but it mattered little. Everything was steely blue and windowless, doors were closed and locked, and there were hardly any people about. Whatever Team Flare was up to was under lock and key.

The elevator took them up to the fifty-seventh floor, the topmost floor, and opened up into a spacious office that looked more like the living room of a lavish penthouse than any workplace. Like the lobby, this room was tastefully decorated with leather furniture, modernist paintings, and carefully neutral colors meant to put occupants at ease. Grace was anything but, but she held her tongue and followed

Sycamore and the security officer into the office.

A man with fiery, orange hair in a custom-tailored, charcoal suit rose from his glass-topped desk and smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. His bright blue eyes remained detached but shifty, icy and observant as they quickly scanned Grace and Sycamore, searching for whatever treachery he was sure they brought with them. Grace instantly disliked this man. No, it was more than that. There was a stench about him, a gaseous aura that reeked of duplicity and cunning and charm, like a poison-soaked blade—just a friendly glance could end in fatality.

"Augustine," the man said courteously and with genuine-sounding mirth. He was good. "This is an unexpected but pleasant surprise."

"Lysandre," Sycamore returned, his voice confident with an edge of hardness Grace had never heard before. "It's been a long time."

"Come in, please. Have a seat." Lysandre nodded to his security officer, who disappeared into the elevator, and led Grace and Sycamore to the plush couches to the left of his desk.

Grace nearly gasped aloud when she caught sight of the creature snoozing on a throw rug near the window basking in the morning sunlight. It was an immense cat with a magnificent, fiery mane and saber tooth incisors poking out over its lower lip. It opened two sleepy, blue eyes as Lysandre approached, and he bent down and ran a hand over its sleek, golden fur. Rings adorned Lysandre's fingers, one with a fat sapphire on his ring finger and two simple silver bands on his thumb and forefinger.

"Pyroar usually takes his naps in here," Lysandre said without looking back at his guests. "All cats do is sleep, even the big ones."

He rose and cast Grace and Sycamore a glance that communicated everything he didn't say. Grace laid her hands on Fletchling's and Rhyhorn's Pokéballs tucked in her pocket, but their weight didn't comfort her as she looked at that snoozing lion curled up just feet away from where she and Sycamore took their seats. It was as large as Rhyhorn, maybe a bit larger, and one paw was as big around as her face. She'd never seen a cat so big before. The scheming Sylveon seemed like an adorable housecat by comparison.

"Augustine, are you going to introduce me to you acquaintance?" Lysandre said as he took a seat opposite his guests and crossed his legs.

"Of course," Sycamore said. "This is Grace Gabena, a former Rhyhorn racer. I've been close with her family for many years. We have a prior engagement to attend to just after this, so I decided to bring her along here out of convenience."

"I see." Lysandre turned his charming smile and those probing eyes on Grace. "Ms. Gabena, I've heard of you. You were quite the racer. I attended several of your races right here in Lumiose years ago. It's an honor."

Grace swallowed the sudden and violent urge to leap across the room and dig her fingers into his face until he bled. He seemed to interpret her mild surprise to her benefit. "The pleasure's all mine."

"So." Lysander spread his arms. "What can I do for you? It's not every day I'm paid a visit by the famous Augustine Sycamore."

"Actually, I was hoping you could help me track down one of your employees. An Ignifera by the name of Malva."

Sycamore paused and Grace watched Lysandre carefully, but he gave nothing away. Not even a flicker of recognition. The man was a rock.

"Malva? She's one of my field agents. She works out of the environmental division. How do you know her?"

He's not even denying he knows her! Grace fisted her hands in the sides of her pants and clenched her jaw, but she willed her face to remain impassive. This man knew the woman who'd taken Serena and nearly killed Calem.

"Actually, she came to me several months ago with questions about Mega Evolution," Sycamore said easily. "You know it's no secret that I'm studying the phenomenon. I was very surprised to meet someone with her unique capabilities, and when I found out she worked for you, I realized I shouldn't have been surprised at all."

Grace watched the two of them watching each other as the silence hung pregnant between them. There were secrets there, a past she was not privy to and one she would probably never know, but whatever Sycamore had signaled to Lysandre, it got his attention. Grace was not sure that was a good thing.

"Is that so?" Lysandre said lightly. "I'm a little surprised myself. To my knowledge, ever since her Houndoom was killed, Malva hasn't used Mega Evolution at all."

"She had a Mega Houndoom?" Sycamore said.

"That's right. Until a former employee of mine executed him right here in this building. I'm sure you remember him. It was your former assistant, Alain, who did the deed. He and his Mega Charizard."

Alain again, Grace thought, her mind racing. She didn't know much about Alain, only that Serena had adored him as a girl and that he used to work for Sycamore. Calem seemed to dislike him, perhaps even suspect him. He was a Titan, if Grace recalled, another one of those Tamers. Dexio was behind Serena's kidnapping, that much was obvious, but hearing Alain's name come up again and again made her wonder. Did he have some part in this? He knew Serena's secret, after all.

"That's interesting," Sycamore said, giving nothing away, but he shifted on the couch next to Grace and betrayed his anxiety. "I haven't been in touch with Alain for some time."

"It seems like you can't keep track of anyone these days, hm?" Lysandre said, chuckling.

His Pyroar got up and stretched, digging its sharp claws into the rug and yawning. Grace clenched her jaw as her eyes were inevitably drawn to Pyroar's elongated teeth. The lion padded lazily over to Lysandre and plopped down on the floor at his feet.

"You know, it's funny you should say that," Sycamore said, clasping his hands over his crossed knee and leaning forward. "As it so happens, I want to find Malva because she was involved in the kidnapping of someone close to me. A young woman named Serena."

Grace held her breath and watched Lysandre carefully for any sign of reaction, but he gave away nothing incriminating.

"Is that name supposed to mean something to me?" he said.

"I find it interesting that that's the first response you have when I've just told you one of your employees was involved in an illegal abduction," Sycamore challenged.

Lysandre chuckled. "Augustine, please, surely you know me better than that." He blinked, and the look in his eyes changed. "Malva's a monster. You of all people should know the reason to keep someone like her around. After all, you employed Alain for years before I ever met him. I can't be held accountable for Malva's actions."

"Alain never abducted an innocent girl," Sycamore said scathingly, unable to control his anger. He paused to collect himself. "So. You're telling me you have no idea what Malva's new interest is in Mega Evolution, and you know nothing about her recent illicit activities? Is this how you treat all your employees?"

A door to the far left opened all of a sudden, and a young girl entered the room. Her auburn hair was tied up in cute braided pigtails and she wore green overalls. She made a beeline for Lysandre, but stopped short and almost tripped over herself when she saw Grace and Sycamore on the couch opposite him.

"Oh, um, I'm sorry, I didn't know you had guests..."

Lysandre stood up, and Pyroar growled at being disturbed. "That's all right, Mairin. They were just leaving."

Sycamore stood up, and Grace followed his lead. Her eyes lingered on the young girl. She couldn't have been more than twelve or thirteen. She was the last sight Grace expected to see with a man like Lysandre.

"Ah, Mairin, it's nice to see you again," Sycamore greeted.

Mairin glanced at Sycamore and smiled like it took every bit of energy she had in her small body. "Professor Sycamore, hello."

"How is Chespie doing?" Sycamore went on amiably. "Any change?"

"No," she said, barely a whisper. "Lysandre says it'll take more time. Oh." She turned back to Lysandre like she'd just remembered something. "Um, Xerosic asked me to come get you. He wanted to see you in the lab."

Lysandre smiled his fake smile for Mairin and laid a hand on her bony shoulder. "Thank you, Mairin, I appreciate you coming here to tell me that. I'll be right down. Why don't you run along?"

Mairin nodded after a moment's pause, and when she turned to leave Grace caught her eye. The girl was young, too young, but for what, Grace did not know. She was just too young. It felt like only yesterday Serena was that small. How things changed. Grace had the strangest urge to call out to Mairin, to say what she couldn't fathom, but the girl headed back through the door whence she came and closed it behind her. Pyroar padded after her and paced the sunbathed rug where it had previously been napping, testing it out again and debating on the best spot to settle down.

"I am truly sorry to hear about this business with Malva," Lysandre said, gesturing toward the elevator. "I don't know where she is or what she's been up to for the last several months, but I'll contact you the moment I hear anything, you have my word."

Sycamore didn't even bother feigning gratitude. "I don't know what you're up to, Lysandre, and frankly I don't want to know. But I will get to the bottom of this, mark my words. I hope for your sake this turns out to be an agent gone rogue. You know very well how Gym Leader Clemont feels about this sort of thing happening on his watch."

Lysandre chuckled and called the elevator. A security officer was waiting in the car when it arrived. "Now, Augustine, threats don't suit you, really. We're on the same side here. I'd like to know what my employee is up to behind my back as much as you. I'm just sorry you made the trip all the way here for nothing."

Grace followed Sycamore into the elevator and cast Lysandre one final, vacuous glance. He didn't even look at her.

"We'll see, won't we?" Sycamore said. "Good day."

The entire ride back to the lobby was passed in silence, and Grace knew better than to break it. The security officer showed them to the front door but didn't wish them well as they left. Sycamore shoved his hands in his pockets and began walking briskly down the sidewalk, leaving Grace to jog after him to catch up. He made it to the corner and crossed the street, and then turned down another block. The overcast sky roiled with the threat of rain, but none fell. Even so, the air was thick with humidity that curled the ends of Grace's short-cropped hair and hung dank with the smells of the city. People rushed past them on their way to work or meetings or running errands. Everyone in a hurry, no one paying attention. Grace drew up beside Sycamore as they waited for the crosswalk signal to change.

"Well?" she said. "He didn't know anything. That was a bust."

"On the contrary, I think we're one step closer to solving this conundrum," Sycamore said, briskly crossing the street once the signal changed and leaving Grace in the dust of his long, leggy strides.

She jogged to catch up again. "What does that mean?"

"You saw his surprise when I mentioned Malva, right? He has no idea what she's doing even though she's his employee."

"So what? He runs a huge company. He can't be expected to know what all his employees are up to."

Sycamore grinned. "Not an employee like Malva. She's an Ignifera, and a damn good one from the number she did on poor Calem. I know Lysandre. I know a skuff like him wants the same thing many skuffs want."

"He's a skuff?"

"That's right. And skuffs are all victims to the same tragedy society saddles them with. He wants power, to be acknowledged the way biology and genetics never acknowledged him. He thinks it was fate that dealt him the short end of the stick, so he'll subvert fate and make his own destiny no matter who he has to step on along the way. Trust me, Grace. I know him."

They'd traversed another two blocks when Sycamore ducked into a café that offered an almost direct view of the Gym in the distance. Prism Tower was steel and cable, built for function over aesthetic appeal. Sycamore grabbed a table near the window and ordered two coffees, and Grace did not protest. He had that look like he was thinking light years ahead and dimensions apart, and something told her not to interrupt him.

When the waitress brought their coffees and left to attend other tables, Sycamore leaned forward, shoulders hunched. "How much do you know about Mega Evolution?"

Grace sipped her coffee black and steaming, immune to the heat as her exhausted body screamed for the caffeine. "Just the term and what you breezed through last night."

He nodded, like he didn't really hear her. "Well, Lysandre's had a hard-on for it since before I met him. Excuse my language."

Grace stared at him deadpan, and he took that as his cue to continue.

"Did you notice how he let slip that Malva's been MIA for a few months?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"It has everything to do with it. A skuff like Lysandre, who's got the money and power and influence to do just about whatever he wants, surrounds himself with strong Tamers to do his dirty work. That's why

he was so interested in Alain, my former assistant. Alain was a Titan, a Dragon Tamer. You don't see many of them running around ready for hire. They keep to their own kind. Ironically, they're fiercely loyal to their clans until someone decides to leave, and then the deserter becomes a pariah."

Grace put down her cup. "You know, I've been hearing Alain's name pop up a lot lately, and I'm starting to wonder if he has anything to do with this."

"If you want my honest opinion? No. He left Lysandre's employ nearly a year ago, I suspect because he was precisely *not* the creature Lysandre wanted to think he was. Did you hear how he compared Alain to Malva? I've rarely heard Lysandre sound so petty. And besides, the timing is way off. I only brought up Alain to make my point. Malva's a powerful Ignifera. Lysandre, being who he is, would want to keep her close where he can control her. That police report I found? I bet you it was a lesson he wanted to teach her not to screw with him. He may not be a Tamer like her, but he's got a kind of power she'll never have."

Grace resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "So you're saying this is a popularity contest. Fascinating as this is, I still don't see how this will help me find my daughter."

Sycamore stirred his coffee absently. "Allow me to explain. What do we know? We know that Malva, an unaccounted for employee of Team Flare, has abducted Serena for reasons most likely having something to do with Mega Evolution. We also know that Lysandre, her boss and a controlling megalomaniac, has no idea about any of this. That tells us that this is a rogue job, meaning Malva is working alone or with a small group of associates under Lysandre's nose. I would even go so far as to assume she's using Team Flare resources to fund whatever she's up to; someone like her would have the access. So?"

"So? Augustine, just spit it out. I don't like these games."

He licked his lips, a little thrilled as his mind raced. "Malva's a glorified thug. That's the only reason Lysandre would have her working for him so closely. She's no scientist, she has no reason to study Mega Evolution, and her Mega Pokémon is dead. I makes no sense for her to be interested in Mega Evolution now. But I have a feeling she's working with someone who's very interested, someone who wants to study it, mostly likely someone who is or was associated

with Team Flare, given their past fixation on Mega Evolution. Meaning—"

"Serena's alive," Grace said, understanding. "She's alive because whoever this scientist is will want to use her in his experiments."

Sycamore grinned. "Precisely. There is hope. And we won't have the full might of Team Flare to contend with to get Serena back. Just a small group of rogues with limited resources at the most. And even better, after we put Lysandre on alert about one of his best agents going rogue, I'm sure he'll be sending in the cavalry to hunt her down. We may not even have to take Malva out ourselves. In a way, our interests in finding and neutralizing Malva are perfectly aligned."

Grace nodded, a little hopeful for the first time since Serena was taken. "That still leaves the problem of how we find Malva and Serena at all. And even if Serena's alive, I don't know what that woman has planned for her. I don't like this, Augustine."

Sycamore raised his coffee mug. "Unfortunately, I haven't quite gotten that far. But I do have a first step that could get us there with a little luck. Malva, or whoever she's working with, is interested in Mega Evolution, yes? So we go to someone who knows more about Mega Evolution than even I do. He may be able to tell us something about how Serena fits into all this, and he has the connections and resources to mobilize a team to rescue her. I hate to say it, but you and I aren't exactly equipped to take on a Tamer like Malva and whoever she's working with."

"Who's this person who knows about Mega Evolution?" Grace said.

Sycamore sipped his coffee and winced at how hot it was. He set down the mug. "An old acquaintance of mine. I hope you don't mind flying. It's the fastest way to get to Shalour City from here, and time is of the essence."

Lysandre watched the elevator doors close on Sycamore and Grace and stood there, his gaze boring a hole into the metal doors.

"Sir? Shall I dispatch a unit to follow them?" a young security officer said, emerging from a hidden door in the vast office. He wore a saber at his belt, sheathed, and carried two Pokéballs.

Lysandre made his way back toward Pyroar, bypassing the officer. The floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked Lumiose City's center, and not far

to the north loomed Prism Tower, an eyesore on the view but an imposing sight nonetheless.

"No. I want you to update me on Malva's status," Lysandre said.

"Sir, I'm afraid she missed her last monthly check-in. We have not heard from her. Her squadron lost contact with her several weeks ago."

Lysandre pressed his lips together. "And Laevus? Is he still on vacation?"

The security officer blinked rapidly. "I'm not sure, sir. He exhausted his three weeks some time ago and has not returned to the office."

Lysandre clenched his fists. "And you didn't think to tell me this?"

The security officer said nothing.

Lysandre advanced on him and grabbed him by the collar. "Why would you keep this from me?"

"I didn't think it was important, sir. Malva has been known to go off the grid for extended periods, and Laevus is just a scientist."

Lysandre was a tall man at six feet four inches, and with his wild, red hair and piercing blue eyes, he towered over the security officer like a vampire lord ready to suck the youth and vigor from his disappointing servant. He bared his teeth, and the officer grabbed his wrist with both hands, eyes wide with shock and fear.

"I don't pay you to think," Lysandre hissed.

He threw the officer bodily to the floor, where the man hit his head on the wall and crumpled to the floor in a daze. Pyroar bolted upright and growled. Its mane glowed as the fur vibrated and produced heat that began to rise off it in shimmering waves. The officer clutched the back of his head and scrambled toward the door Mairin had disappeared into earlier.

"Forgive me, sir," the officer pleaded. "I-I won't make another mistake, I swear."

"No, you certainly won't. Pyroar." He gestured toward the cowering officer.

Pyroar gnashed its teeth and pounced, shedding embers from its great

mane that burned holes in the rug it had been lying on. With the efficiency of a born predator, the lion knocked the security officer on his back with its wide paws.

"No please!"

The officer's desperate entreaty devolved into a garbled gurgling as Pyroar sank its smoking teeth into his neck and bit down hard enough to crush the windpipe and grind the bones. The officer's legs jerked, and soon the stench of burning blood and cooked flesh permeated the room.

Lysandre frowned and covered his mouth and nose with a white handkerchief tucked into his breast pocket, then as an afterthought returned to his desk and picked up the phone.

"Patch me through to Level Four," he said, lowering the handkerchief.

In the corner of the room, Pyroar was busy sniffing its kill and deciding whether or not indulge in a meal as it paced up and down the length of the dead officer's body.

"Cora, it's me. You've just been promoted," Lysandre said into the earpiece once the line connected to the building security office. "That's right, Emile is no longer with us." There was a pause as he listened to Cora on the other end. "Drop whatever you're doing. I want you to mobilize a task force to do one thing, and one thing only. Find Malva. She may be with Laevus, but I can't confirm that. And Cora, tell no one. If I have a leak, I want it plugged. As soon as you locate either of them, send a retrieval squad." Another pause. "No, I don't care who she's with or what she's doing. If you encounter any resistance, eliminate it. That includes Malva herself."

He hung up the phone and found Pyroar sitting on its haunches on the other side of his desk licking its bloody paw clean. Lysandre studied the lion Pokémon that had been his companion since he was a boy, pensive.

"You're too picky," he said.

Pyroar paused and looked up at him with sleepy, unblinking eyes, as if to say, 'You're one to talk.' Lysandre reached for the phone again and dialed his personal assistant. "Louis, send a clean up crew to my office. Emile had an accident."

He hung up the phone, knowing Louis, his middle-aged assistant of

nearly ten years, would know how to proceed discreetly and quickly. Business finished, Lysandre held the handkerchief over his mouth and nose once more and gestured to Pyroar to follow. He sidestepped Emile's corpse to get to the door, hardly glancing at the nearly severed head drowning in a pool of dark blood and staining the charred carpet.

Alain lay in bed that night like he did every night, waiting for sleep. He knew he slept because every morning that damned alarm woke him at dawn for another backbreaking day of training. It had been a nice evening with just Korrina. They'd made a simple dinner and opened up a bottle of wine, and spent the evening talking about their bucket lists. Korrina had gushed that she wanted to go skydiving over the Twist Mountains in Unova.

"Skydiving? Seriously?" he said.

"Of course I'm serious! I heard Gym Leader Skyla of Mistralton invented a flying suit that lets people glide on the winds. You don't even have to be a Caelifer for it to work."

Alain chuckled. "Why Korrina, I never took you for the type to get chummy with a Caelifera."

Korrina rolled her eyes. "Listen, Titan. For a chance to fly? I'd muck her fucking bird coop if she asked. Don't tell me you've never dreamed of flying."

He shrugged. "Well, sure. I've never met a Caelifer, but even a lowly Titan like me's always wondered what it's like to be one. Charizard's a great substitute, but I guess it's not the same."

"Exactly!"

"Well, how about this, then. When you decide to go, I'll go with you and I'll even hold your hair when you throw up after."

She flipped him off, but her heart wasn't in it as she bit back a smile. "Sure, it's a date."

Alain smiled a little at the memory and draped his arm over his eyes, listening to the sounds of the crashing waves through his open window and wondering what it would be like to fly, to fall, with Korrina. The wind in their ears rushing like the waves outside. The earth at their feet. A lovely fantasy for a dreamer who couldn't even

tempt sleep on this dark night.

Alain dozed, the sheets thin over his body, and he almost didn't hear the door click. Stirring, he let his arm fall and blinked through the inky blackness. Starlight filtered through the open window and diffused among the sheer curtains that fluttered gently in the wind. It illuminated a small silhouette near the door, and he pushed up on one elbow.

"...Korrina?" he said, his voice a little raspy from drowsiness.

The silhouette froze, and Korrina brushed her long hair out of her face and looked at him over her shoulder. She was in her pajamas, an oversized T-shirt and shorts and barefoot.

"...Hi," she said.

Rubbing his eyes, Alain blinked the tendrils of sleep away and sat up fully in bed. "Hi? What're you doing?"

She crossed her arms. "I just... I'm sorry, this was a mistake. I didn't mean to wake you up."

She turned back to the door and made to open it, but before he could process a coherent thought, Alain was already on his feet and pushing the door closed over her shoulder before she could slip through. He locked eyes with Korrina. This close he could smell the salt and the sunshine in her hair.

"Korrina," he said, hardly recognizing his own voice.

She searched his face, and that look paralyzed him to the spot. The waves ceased their crashing, the stars hid their fires, and the floor threatened to give out beneath him. What would it be like to fly?

"I feel like I've been sleepwalking my whole life," she said, her voice far away as though from another time, another place. "Until I met you."

Alain's hand fell, fell on her, and he pulled her to him without a word. They met the wall as if in a vacuum devoid of the sounds and scents and darkness of the world in that small room, hands in hair and lips on flesh and clothing little more than an inconvenience. There was a violence to their movements, the way she raked her nails over his shoulder blades and her teeth found his bottom lip and he picked her up by the thighs, clothes stripped away, fingers in flesh, and pressed

her harder against the wall.

Awake, alive, all those sleepless nights a mirage of the mind when every day had been the passage of light to dark with nothing in between and he'd never even noticed. The dead don't know they're dead until someone resurrects them.

She whispered in his ear, unintelligible and cryptic like some arcane language lost to time and the rhythm between them, more a feeling than a sound and instantly understood: *more*. Her long hair draped over his shoulder and fluttered with each push, a whisper all its own, and she was looking at him, right at him, and smiling into a drowning kiss that was almost the end of him.

"Alain," she breathed against him.

He squeezed his eyes shut and saw white, but the self-important asshole in him was not about to let him take the easy way out, and soon his legs were carrying them the three or four steps to the bed before the rest of him could catch up.

The sheets and pillows gave under them as they fell, but Korrina didn't loosen her grip on him and drew him in again with her thighs. His fingers fisted the sheets and her hair like some fantasy he'd entertained in nights past, except now he felt it, now his eyes were open, now he *knew* and she knew and fuck, *why* did she have to say his name like that again?

No, say it again. *Say it again.*

She pulled him down for another bruising kiss, his hand on her hip, her thigh, skin on skin on sheets, and the salt in the air and on her neck, and her necromancer voice in his ear pulling him out of the ashes and melting the shackles that tethered him, both of them, to something from which they were no longer running now that they'd found a piece of something they didn't know they were searching for, gasping and reaching, little by little.

The waves returned and gently lulled Alain out of the haze as he breathed on his side on the bed, limbs tangled among Korrina's and the twisted sheets. For a few moments, they breathed together as they floated, riding the winds and dreaming of flying. She watched him through half-lidded eyes, languorous and heady with their lingering intoxication.

Alain trailed a hand up her side, traced the curve of her waist, the

slope of her shoulder, and down her collarbone. "I know what you mean," he said, thinking of her last words to him.

She smiled, shyly at first, then wider, until a soft laugh escaped her. It was contagious, and Alain found himself laughing with her just for the simple joy of hearing the sound of it. They rolled together among the sheets and over the pillows, laughing and touching and not sleeping a wink, the world outside this room forgotten.

When Serena regained consciousness, her body ached as though it had taken a spin in a blender but come out in one piece. Her hands and feet were chained to a wall with only five feet of rein. The chains were heavy and her shoulders ached from holding them up. The chill was palpable even in her grubby outdoor clothes. She'd planned on absconding to the forest east of Vaniville Town in the middle of the night the last she remembered, and had dressed sensibly in jeans, a hoodie, and hiking boots, but even they didn't keep out the biting cold despite the blazing heaters running at maximum power in the lab.

The lab. She was in a lab of some sort, that much was clear. It had the same examination tables, many of the same tools and machines, and even a similar layout as Sycamore's lab back in Lumiose. But this lab appeared to be in a basement, possibly even underground given the lack of windows and rock walls. The lights were drilled into the rock ceiling and glowed a dull yellowish-orange and buzzed softly. Somewhere deeper in the lab, a generator hummed in a droning monotone. Serena was sitting on the bare rock floor with nothing to insulate her from the cold, and she shivered as she huddled as close to the nearest heating vent as possible, which was a dismal four feet away out of her direct line of contact.

She'd woken up groggy and already shackled with no recollection of how she'd gotten here, wherever this was, but she was already trying to piece together what had happened and why. There was a person here, an overweight man in a woolen parka and earmuffs waddling about the lab every once in a while. He hadn't noticed she was awake yet, and Serena intended to keep it that way until she could get ahold of herself. He was clearly some kind of lab worker or scientist from the looks of him and his apparent familiarity with his surroundings.

More intriguing, however, was the small Darumaka that followed him around. It had stopped its roll to stare at Serena when it noticed her waking up and crawled toward her. She'd never seen a Darumaka before, only in pictures, and this one appeared curious and relatively

harmless.

"Hello," she'd whispered to it, her eyes following its nest of orange heartstrings clustered around its oblong body.

The Darumaka hesitated when she spoke to it, its heartstrings pulsing with uncertainty.

"He's your trainer, right?" Serena pressed. "But he's doing a bad thing chaining me up here. See?" She showed Darumaka her chains.

The little Pokémon rolled on its rump and grabbed its feet in its hands, grunting a little. Its heartstrings pulsed faster.

Serena tried to focus on breathing and tamped down the urge to start sobbing in fear. "It's okay, I know it's confusing. You want to help him, but you want to help me, too."

Darumaka blinked at her, and she was suddenly reminded of Calem and that look he got when she zeroed in on what he was thinking almost to the T. Serena had always had a knack for reading emotions ever since her encounter with the weird tree, especially Pokémon's. It had started with the first Pokémon she'd ever befriended—Swablu. She'd never questioned it, but she hoped it would help her now.

Serena looked around and saw that on a nearby table, her three Pokéballs lay in a dish, along with her other personal effects—a wallet with a few bills in the fold, house keys, a couple hair ties. She licked her lips and tried to calm her nerves.

"Darumaka," she whispered. "How about this. Will you bring me one of those Pokéballs over there? Any one will do."

Darumaka grunted again and wriggled its feet still in its hands, its uncertainty palpable. Serena read its heartstrings and blinked in surprised.

"No, of course I won't attack your trainer. I just want to leave this place," she reassured Darumaka. "Please."

Darumaka's beady eyes shifted between Serena and the Pokéballs on the table a few feet away, but it finally relented and rolled toward the table. It took a moment to roll around the table, trying to find a way up, but soon gave up and rolled right into one of the metal legs with Rollout. The table shook a little, but nothing came of it. Darumaka, undeterred, pulled back and repeated the process again, and again,

and again, until soon Serena's keys clattered to the stone floor and she winced. The Pokéballs remained in their dish, but the dish itself had moved to the edge of the table. Just a little more!

Low growling startled Serena, and Darumaka squealed in fear and rolled away between the tables. Serena almost cried out to it, but a sleek Pyroar crept around the long table to her left, saber teeth bared and long, fiery crest draped over her back like a cape. Serena froze in her spot, her bare hands flat against the rocky floor and quaking as it siphoned the heat from her freezing fingers. The lioness drooled boiling saliva from her jaws as she loomed over Serena.

Serena watched the lioness's orange heartstrings spark around her, concentrated chaos and focused violence, as those blue eyes bored into Serena.

"Pyroar, to me," a woman's voice called.

Serena blinked as the Pyroar turned tail and padded back the way it had come. A woman with bright, magenta hair in a white parka and winter boots petted its shimmering crest with an air of tenderness, subtle but not lost on Serena who could read her heartstrings, as fiery orange as Pyroar's.

"Malva, what the hell is this?" the fat man Serena had seen before said. "There are Flare Agents at the door!"

"Yes, I brought them, obviously," the woman called Malva said casually, more focused on making Pyroar purr.

"And I repeat, what the *hell*? This is exactly what I wanted to avoid! Are you so incompetent that you didn't get that part of the deal?"

Malva narrowed her lurid eyes and cast a glance askance at the heavyset scientist. His double chin quivered and spit glistened on his lower lip as his similarly red eyes searched her for answers. His faint, white heartstrings pulsed with the barest tendrils of orange, betraying his distress. Serena stayed silent, but her mind raced.

An Ignifera... But he's not a regular pleb. What is he?

"What was that, Laevus?" Malva said with an air of casual indifference that nonetheless scared Laevus enough to tense. His heartstrings pulsed erratically. "It sounded like you were calling me *stupid* for bringing you some extra security. I vetted them personally. Or am I now stupid *and* untrustworthy?"

Laevus wrung his hands. "I didn't mean it like that." Remembering his confidence, he added, "But you should have told me! I don't like surprises."

Malva gave Pyroar a good scratch behind the ear, earning herself a loving head rub against her side and a loud purr. "Oh believe me. No one would ever think you spontaneous enough to enjoy a good surprise."

Malva's eyes suddenly swept over Serena, and they locked gazes.

"By the way, I'll be keeping Maru with me. I don't want him anywhere near the Magus."

Serena paled and her throat went dry. How did she know? Was that was this was about?

Laevus scowled. "Maru isn't the problem."

"He is when you have a Magus on your hands," Malva said.

"What does that have to do with anything?"

Malva sashayed toward Serena, taking her time and dragging her red-painted nails on the stainless steel table to her left. Pyroar didn't follow, instead stretching out and yawning. Serena remained seated and straightened her back, refusing to be intimidated by this woman. Malva squatted down a few feet from her and removed her rose-tinted sunglasses, revealing the full power of her blood-red eyes, eyes that burned just to look upon. Serena did not waver.

"Call it a hunch," Malva said.

There was nothing there, no anger or contempt or anything Serena may have expected to see in a villain. Because the people who'd abducted her from her home and brought her to wherever this was were undoubtedly villains in her mind, as vile as they came. They had to be. Why else would they have chained her up here?

"Whatever. Those agents are your responsibility if you're staying. I don't want them interfering with my work." Laevus disappeared into another room.

Malva continued to peer at Serena.

"What is this?" Serena broke the silence. "Why am I here? How do you

know about me?"

Malva watched her like she was memorizing her face. "It's nothing personal, kid," she said. Curious, like she wondered about that herself.

Serena blinked, hating the heat behind her eyes. "If it's not personal, then let me go!" she hissed.

"Do you love your family?"

Serena was taken aback by the abrupt change in subject. "What?"

"Would you help them if they asked you to?"

Serena held her hands together and laced her fingers for warmth, but it did little to help. She thought of Grace, her mother. What was she doing now? Was she looking for her? Was Calem? Did her father even know? Did anyone even know where she was?

"It's selfish, the love we have for family. It doesn't care about the truth. Only the blood. There's no bond thicker than blood. So no, I can't let you go." Malva retrieved Serena's house keys and set them back on the table. She pushed the dish with Serena's three Pokéballs back to the center of the table. "For what it's worth, if it wasn't you, it would be some other girl."

The tears flooded Serena's eyes as Malva walked away, and her hands shook. Serena had never been afraid to be alone, knowing she would be alone for the rest of this life that wasn't hers. But watching Malva walk away, she found that she had no words, no breath, nothing at all to stop this awful energy Malva left behind for her to wallow in. And for the first time, the only time since she woke from a dream of death's gnashing jaws under a canopy of butterflies in a place that had never existed, the fear found her again.

The iron around her ankles and wrists burned with cold, bruising her skin down to her bones and sapping her strength with each passing hour. Serena tugged on her chains, but they did not give. No one came when she called, and she didn't call besides—no one would hear her. Even the heartstrings did not reach her here, this place devoid of heat and light and even darkness. There was only the stale, lewd light crackling in the artificial lamps in the ceiling, the dead steel tables, the frozen cave, and the earth packed tight above. All those years suffering Grace's sad looks, that morose secrecy that silently wished none of this was real, that Serena was still Serena, still the baby girl she'd raised, and Serena finally understood. If she'd just stayed home,

if she'd just done as Grace had asked, then it would be some other girl here instead of her.

Shuffling stirred her sleep—yes, she'd dozed off at some point—and Serena scrambled into a sitting position. Someone had thrown a woolen blanket over her for warmth, and it helped. She clutched it closer as the shuffling drew nearer.

Laevus appeared, and two men dragged a young boy between them just in front of him. They tossed the boy to the ground a few feet from Serena and shackled him in chains extending from the wall. Laevus barked orders at the two grunts assisting him, and they disappeared back the way they came. Laevus cast a lingering glance at Serena, but she was focused on the boy that had suddenly joined her jail, and he left.

The boy was sprawled on the floor in jeans and an old, ratty sweatshirt. His auburn hair was thick but mussed and greasy from lack of washing. He coughed weakly and his arms shook when he tried to sit up and failed. Serena crawled toward him and gave him an arm for support.

"Hey, are you okay?" she said.

He coughed again and squeezed her arm with a hand. His fingers shook, spindly like an old woman's, but his face was young. Haggard and sallow, but young. Bloodshot, grey eyes swiveled in their sockets and found her but had trouble focusing.

"Wh-Who're you?" he rasped.

"I'm Serena." Serena tried to keep her breathing calm as she took in his etiolated pallor and emaciated frame. *What did they do to you?* "It's okay, you're not alone."

I'm not alone.

The boy shivered violently and clutched her closer. Their shackles clinked together, loud in this hollow space. He smelled of body odor and sweat. How long had he been down here? But Serena ignored it, thankful for some company.

"Why is this happening to me?" he whispered, almost a sob but without the tears. He was so thin and frail that she doubted he could cry if he wanted to.

"I don't know. But can you tell me your name?"

He searched her eyes, not really seeing her as his mind lingered in the dark place the people here had put him in. "It's Trevor," he said finally. "Do you... Do you know where my parents are?"

His heartstrings were faint and pale—a pleb, just like her mother. But his were weak and pulsing erratically.

"I don't know," Serena admitted. "What did they do to you? What do they want?"

He sniffled and huddled in on himself. "I don't know. They just... He said he wanted to see what would happen. It's hurts."

A dry sob racked his body, and Serena looped her arms around his shoulders to hold him close. "Shh, it's okay, I'm here." She pulled him toward her to offer him some of her warmth, paltry as it was. Something sharp bumped her chest and she pulled back a bit.

"What's that?" she asked, running her hand over his back.

The back of his hoodie protruded just slightly, and when she touched her fingers to the spot, they came away damp with blood.

"Ow," Trevor whimpered.

Serena scooted back and tried to look at his back properly. The light here was dim, and all she could make out was a dark patch between his shoulder blades.

"Trevor," she said evenly. "I need to check something. I think you're hurt. Can you take off your sweatshirt?"

"Hurt?" His voice wavered.

"It's okay!" Serena said quickly. "I just want to check. It doesn't look bad."

"O-Okay."

He let her peel back his sweatshirt over his shoulders, which she did slowly and carefully. A wet sound squelched as she pulled the garment down his back to his elbows. He wore a dark, long-sleeved shirt under his sweatshirt. The bloodstain was larger on the shirt, but she still could not see what was causing it.

"I'm just gonna lift up your shirt, okay?"

Trevor nodded and let her inch his shirt up over his back. He shivered at the cold and her touch, and Serena slowly shimmied the shirt higher. The veins under the skin of his lower back were engorged and purple, and they became more pronounced the closer she got to the point between his shoulder blades. Her hands shook as she hiked his shirt higher, inch by inch, and followed the fat, violet protrusions with her eyes.

"Oh my god," she gasped, tearing up.

"What's wrong?" Trevor asked, his voice laced with fear and trepidation.

Serena swallowed as she stared at the spot between Trevor's shoulder blades. Embedded in the skin was the sharp edge of a crystal that glowed with its very own heartstrings—red and blue and green and purple and every other color imaginable in a sun-cut prism of light. It sank into his body, where the skin seemed to swallow it whole. Veins fattened with blood converged on it, pulsing faintly in time with Trevor's heartbeat. Serena touched the crystal lightly with a finger, and it glowed a faint pink in response.

"Ah," Trevor gasped. "What'd you do?"

Serena bit her tongue so hard it bled. She hastily yanked Trevor's shirt back down and pulled his sweatshirt back up. He turned to look at her with those young, smoky eyes, lost and afraid and glassy with pain and exhaustion. She forced the tears back.

"Nothing," she lied. "You're gonna be okay. I promise, I'll get you out of here."

"Y-You will? How?"

"*If it wasn't you, it would be some other girl.*"

Well, Serena was the one here, and she could damn well do more than the average girl. "Yeah, I will. I'm a Tamer, and I've got Pokémon. I'll figure something out. I promise I'll get you out of here, okay?"

Trevor stared at her.

"Okay?" She shook his shoulder.

He nodded numbly. "Okay."

"Okay," Serena repeated.

What now?

What would Calem do? He would be brave, that's what. And he'd be smart. Well, Serena wasn't stupid.

"Trevor, listen to me." She cupped his face with her hands, and the chains shackling her clinked heavily. "Do you know anything about these people? What they want? Anything at all could help. If I know what they're after, maybe I can make a deal with them, I don't know."

Trevor's eyes unfocused. "I don't..."

Serena blinked fresh tears away. "Come on, Trevor, I know it's hard, but try to think. Try to remember. Did they say anything? What about that guy, Laevus? He's the scientist, right?"

Trevor blinked, and when he looked at her again it was as though he'd woken from a trance, totally sobered. "Laevus," he whispered. "He's looking for something."

Serena nodded. "Good, that's good. What's he looking for?"

"The answer. He said he was looking for the answer."

"The answer to what?"

Trevor sucked in a rattling breath. He was shivering like mad, so Serena wrapped her blanket around him, careful to avoid his shoulders and not disturb the implant there.

"The answer," Trevor whispered, "to Mega Evolution."

Serena stared openly at Trevor. "Mega Evolution?"

What does that have to do with anything?

Shuffling drew her attention. Laevus and his two lackeys approached, and Serena hugged Trevor close on instinct.

"You two, if you're going to be here then make yourselves useful. I want her on my table, docile. Think you can manage that?" Laevus said.

The two grunts, each clad in identical black ski jackets and thermal pants, advanced on Serena. They reached for her, but she struggled to resist, shielding Trevor with her body. Trevor cried out.

"Leave her alone!"

His pathetic wails fell on deaf ears, and Serena's chains prevented her from offering much resistance. One of the grunts unlocked her shackles and looped his arms around hers, locking her to him in a hold from which she was helpless to escape in her weakened state and against his obvious training. He handed the key back to Laevus, who returned it to the chain on his belt with a number of other keys. His lurid eyes lingered on Serena, the eyes of a man starved and drooling over a choice morsel.

"Magus," he said. "You're exactly what I need."

"Let me go!" Serena cried out. "You kidnapped me! That's against the law!"

"The only law here is the one I make, girl. Hold your tongue."

Serena struggled against her captors, who dragged her along behind Laevus as he led them to an operating table in the far end of the lab. Various medical equipment littered the work stands around it, all cleaned and gleaming silver like some pirate's boon. The sharp edges reflected in Serena's wide, blue eyes.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

"Shut up," one of the grunts said.

He smashed her head against the stainless steel table unexpectedly. The pain bloomed in Serena's forehead and made her see stars for a few seconds. Her knees wobbled and went limp as her brain forgot how to function through the pain, and the two grunts lifted her bodily onto the table. Blood trickled down her forehead from a deep gash in her head and leaked into her eyes and mouth.

"I want what you have," Laevus said, oblivious to her suffering. "I want the secret denied me at birth."

Serena coughed, the blood coppery and bitter on her tongue as she lay on the table and the grunts secured her with leather straps. One of them ripped the left sleeve of her sweatshirt off at the shoulder to expose her arm.

"Mega Evolution," Serena rasped, half delirious as Laevus hovered over her with a thick needle and swabbed her exposed arm over a vein.

"That's right. You would know, being what you are. Well, it won't matter soon. I'll have the secret, and then your kind will be obsolete. But first, some tests."

"I don't..." Serena lost her voice and felt a prick in her arm where he nicked her with the needle. She watched as her blood flowed through a clear tube into a vial at the end. Her enchanted eyes followed the flow of her own heartstrings bottled up in that vial. "I don't know Mega Evolution," she managed.

"That's not a problem," Laevus said casually. His double chin wiggled as he spoke, glossy with sebum and sweat. "You'll learn soon enough."

Serena's head swam, and she wondered if that blow would have permanent repercussions. She was no doctor, but pain of this magnitude was all the more worrying to a civilian. She thought of her mother then, not for any particular reason, but just because. She must be so scared, Serena thought. Scared and unable to do anything.

Darumaka rolled around on the floor at Laevus's feet as he drained Serena of her blood and looked up at her with its beady eyes. Serena barely saw it through her unshed tears, but she saw the vibrancy of its orange heartstrings, pulsing with nerves and fear. And she remembered her promise.

The blood left her body, and consciousness left her with it. The pain in her head dulled to a low ache as the darkness set in, and all she could think of was that little girl who'd run away because she thought she was stronger than this. Until death found her, as it finds us all.

7. Chapter 7

Wanderer
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

When Korrina woke the next morning, it was to the sun warming the sheets and the weight of another beside her. She stirred, eyes unfocused with sleep's last tendrils, and blinked. The sheets were not white like hers, but blue and twisted up in a comforter that was slipping off the edge of the bed. She had lost her pillow sometime in the night and lay flat on the mattress, her hair her only cushion. Alain lay on his back with an arm over his bare chest, breathing deeply in sleep.

Korrina remained still for a few moments watching him and remembering the events of the previous night. She bit her lip and turned onto her side, pulled the sheet up over her chest, and propped herself up on one elbow. Alain still did not stir.

"You're a heavy sleeper," she said softly.

Looking at him like this, she remembered the first day they'd met and how strung out he'd looked. Gaunt in the face and soft everywhere else after months of lassitude, he'd nonetheless revealed his true nature to her as a Titan, one of the fearsome Dragon Tamers she'd only ever heard stories about growing up. There was something in his demeanor, an aura about him that could chill her blood the way it had when he'd briefly lost his temper after she refused to help him. It was the same controlled malice he'd employed against the Goomy, Sliggoo, and Goodra in the mines. It had saved them both that day.

And now, sleepy and unguarded, it was almost easy to forget he was the same person. No, that wasn't quite right. He was the same person, but she'd never really taken the time to see it. We all have our demons, a part of us we keep hidden from the world, but they are nevertheless a part of us, inseparable.

Korrina smiled and traced a finger over his stomach, following the ripple of muscle that hadn't been there months ago. Scars bumped her fingertips as she dragged them up toward his chest. A particularly thick scar exploded on his chest, like he'd caught a bomb and somehow lived through it. For all he'd shared, for everything she knew about him that no one else did, there was still so much that eluded her. She would ask him. She wanted to know. She bent down and

kissed the scar on his chest, wondering what it was from and smiling in the knowledge that he'd tell her if she asked.

Alain stirred under her, and his hand found her hair pooling over his stomach. "Korrina?"

She looked up at him through her lashes and smiled lazily. "Morning."

She watched the couple seconds it took those luminous blue eyes to flutter awake and recall their current situation. He reached for her waist and pulled her up toward him.

"Did I sleep?" he asked.

"Most people call it that."

She twisted a finger in his hair absently.

"Huh. I guess that's why I don't feel tired for once."

"Hmm, how can we fix that?"

He looked down at her, easily discerning her meaning, and tightened his hold on her waist. Before she knew it, he flipped her over onto her back. The sheet she'd pulled around herself lay between them, and he yanked it down.

"What'd you have in mind?" he said, eyes wandering.

Korrina hooked an arm around his neck and pulled him into a long, slow kiss. "Gosh, I'm just drawing a total blank here."

He smirked against her lips and ran his hand down her hip to her thigh, pulling her closer. As they shifted, the sunlight caught Korrina's eyes and she squinted against the light. It was obnoxiously bright for so early in the morning.

Korrina's eyes flew open and she tensed up, her thoughts racing. Alain pulled back.

"Hey, are you okay?"

Korrina stared at the window and the fluttering curtains. "Alain, what time is it?"

"Uh..."

There was a clock on the nightstand on his side of the bed, and Korrina snatched it up. As though she'd been electrocuted, she jerked bodily and gaped at the clock.

"Quarter past ten?! Shit!"

She threw Alain off her and leaped off the bed, searching for her clothes on the floor. Alain just watched her.

"So what?" he said, lying back.

"So what? So we're late for training, dumbass! Like, a couple *hours* late."

Honestly, what was his problem? Why wasn't he scrambling? Korrina pulled her shirt on in a haste only to discover it was on inside out.

"Yeah, but you're the Gym Leader. It's not like the rules apply to you. Who cares?"

Korrina found his boxers and threw them at his face. "Actually, they *do* apply. And now, you and me're in for a day from hell courtesy of your busted alarm clock. Thanks for that, by the way."

Alain sat up in bed and pulled his boxers out of his face. "Wait, what?"

Back in her pajamas from the night before, Korrina marched to the door and yanked it open. "Better get dressed, Titan. We've got a full day of running ahead of us."

She left him looking like he might burst into tears at any minute. He nearly did five hours later when Korrina lapped him for the twenty-seventh time in their ceaseless run around the island.

"Is this the universe punishing me?" he complained as she slowed her jog to fall into step with him in the sand.

"No, just the house rules," Korrina panted.

"Ugh, don't you get some sorta special pass for being the Gym Leader?"

Korrina wiped the sweat from her brow. The sun still had a good two or three hours before it set. "Oh *sure*, 'cause that's totally fair to the Gym trainers."

"I can't believe I had to pass on morning sex for *this*," Alain grumbled.

They passed by the back porch, where Gurkinn and his Machamp were seated together enjoying the sea breeze and sun.

"Look sharp!" he barked at Alain and Korrina as they passed.

"Oh, you gotta be fucking kidding me," Alain said.

Korrina laughed despite her exhaustion and picked up the speed, leaving Alain in the dust.

"Hey!" he shouted after her.

"Catch me if you can, Slowpoke!"

Alain chased after her, and after another hour of running finally caught her and plunged the both of them into the sea. The water was cold and the sun was low in the sky, but they laughed and rolled with the waves to cleanse the sweat and grime from the all-day run under the sun. The waves crashed against her, soaking her clothes and tangling her hair, and Alain kissed her amidst the sea spray.

By the time they finally made it back inside and got cleaned up, Gurkinn had sent all the Gym trainers home for the evening. He was waiting for them in the kitchen alone.

"Grandpa?" Korrina said, running her fingers through her shower-damp hair. "I thought Mack was supposed to join us for dinner tonight."

Gurkinn rose from his chair and the tea he'd been drinking. He wore a thick, violet robe with billowing sleeves that contrasted elegantly with his icy green eyes. Korrina recognized the attire as his formal wear, and suddenly felt inexplicably conspicuous in her leggings and oversized T-shirt. Alain was just as casual, but he didn't seem to share her thoughts.

"Not tonight, my dear. I've asked him to reschedule. Tonight, I wanted it to be just us."

"Look, Gurkinn, if this is about us both oversleeping this morning, then it's my fault," Alain said.

Gurkinn chuckled. "No, it's not. But now that you mention it, Korrina, I hope you won't make missing work a habit. The Gym trainers come here to train under you. It would not be fair to disappoint them."

Korrina flushed and would have punched Alain in his pretty face if Gurkinn wasn't standing right there. "No, Grandpa. It won't happen again."

Gurkinn looked between the two of them. "Of course, I don't mean to suggest anything beyond that. Whatever you two decide to do in your free time is your business. You don't need my approval or permission, in any case."

Now it was Alain's turn to blush, and he crossed his arms. Korrina remembered what he'd confessed about Gurkinn making him feel like a teenager.

"Grandpa, I'd rather not talk about this," Korrina said quickly. "Please."

Gurkinn spared her a knowing smile. "No, forgive me. I'm an old man and I forget my manners at times. I didn't mean to pry."

Alain shot her a look, and Korrina had to bite her cheek not to laugh.

"Anyway, please follow me," Gurkinn said. "There is something I'd like Alain to see."

Gurkinn walked past them to the stairs, and as soon as he was out of earshot, Alain leaned down toward Korrina.

"What's going on?"

"You mean *besides* you basically announcing to my seventy-eight-year-old grandfather that we're sleeping together?"

"Hey, you're not embarrassed, are you?"

She glared up at him. "Is that a trick question?"

"Um, no?"

Korrina's gaze softened and she reached up to push his damp bangs out of his eyes. "You need a haircut. Remind me tomorrow. Now come on. I think I know what Grandpa wants you to see."

She headed up the stairs after Gurkinn, and Alain followed.

"You didn't answer my question," he called to her as they passed the third floor and kept climbing.

She smirked at him over her shoulder. "The only thing that

embarrasses me is you falling on your ass all the time. People will think I'm a two-bit Bellatrix by association."

"Oh gee, *sorry* I don't have superhuman fighting abilities like you. It's not like I can do anything extremely useful like mind control rampaging Dragons or whatever."

Korrina laughed. "Quit complaining, Titan. You have your moments."

Gurkinn was waiting on the roof of the Tower of Mastery. Alain had never been up here, but the first thing he noticed was Korrina's gaze on a spot at the railing opposite the door, and he thought about her mother. She'd jumped from this very tower, perhaps from that very spot Korrina was staring at. Alain had the urge to take Korrina's hand then, but Gurkinn beckoned them both farther out onto the rooftop.

The roof was stone and guarded by a metal railing all around the perimeter. It was dark out, and there were enough clouds in the sky to cast moon shadows on the beach and over the tower. But in between the streaks of fog overhead, the stars twinkled brilliantly so far from the artificial light of the city to the south. The moon was full tonight, and its light on the frothing waves made the ocean look like a sea of liquid silver.

In the center of the roof, a metal podium extended another twenty feet above. Bars that tethered it to the floor and held a stone pedestal at the confluence suspended it. In the moonlight, something cradled in the pedestal sparkled like a gem.

"Come, stand here, please." Gurkinn beckoned him to opposite edge of the roof.

Alain did as he was asked, and Korrina remained to the side a ways.

"You came to us some months ago," Gurkinn said, "and since then, you have spent almost every day training hard to sharpen your mind and body. Did you find what you were searching for?"

Alain faltered at the sudden and direct question. "Well..."

Gurkinn watched him patiently, his long mustachios billowing gently in the light breeze, and Alain once again felt the urge to go to Korrina. He turned to look at her standing there with her hands on her hips, oversized T-shirt that hung low in the collar, shapely legs in black leggings. She caught him looking at her and frowned in question.

Alain ran a hand through his hair.

"You know, I think I'm getting there," he said, smiling a little.

Korrina let her arms fall and she held his gaze, those bright, green eyes wide and searching.

"Good, that's very good to hear. Korrina has told me you've made excellent progress in training, too. You've kept your word to us when you first arrived here, after all."

"*I'll do whatever it takes,"* he'd vowed that first night here in the Tower of Mastery.

"I confess that we've been keeping something from you," Gurkinn went on. "You came here looking for answers about Mega Evolution, and the only answer there is has been here the entire time without you knowing it."

"What?"

Gurkinn raised a hand toward the sky. "What do you see?"

Alain looked up, but all he could see were the stars above. "I guess I see the sky."

"Yes, the sky," Gurkinn said. "We stand here at the top of the tallest tower in Shalour City. And yet, the sky looms far above us." Gurkinn waved a hand across the nightscape. "No matter how high you climb, you'll always have a place to look up to and realize your own insignificance. Just as no matter how strong you and Charizard become, there will always be someone just as strong.

"But you cannot fly higher alone. Alain, you have left behind years and people and memories coming here searching for a way to move forward. But to go forward, you must extend a hand to others. Until you stop running from the world, you won't appreciate what it truly means to be alone." Gurkinn paused and put a hand on Alain's shoulder. "I think perhaps you understand that now, yes?"

Alain nodded.

"Then there is nothing more anyone can teach you. Mega Evolution... There is no secret to mastering it that you do not already know. Mega Evolution is merely the manifestation of a deep bond between Tamer and Pokémon. It is proof that we are stronger together than alone. To

master it, it isn't enough to expect your Pokémon to fight. You, too, must extend a hand and fight alongside it. No relationship can survive attack if it is one-sided. As long as you embrace your bond, you can do extraordinary things."

Alain rubbed his thumb over the palm of his hand, where he'd sliced open his skin many times to transfer his Titan blood to Charizard and activate its Mega Evolution. Was it possible that all this time they were running on fumes? All those battles, all that training to perfect Charizard's technique... It was all one-sided?

As soon as he had the thought, he banished it from his mind. Of course it wasn't enough. And somewhere deep down, the part of him that remembered what it was like to care about another living creature had compelled him to come here before he burned out completely. All this time, and Charizard had been doing all the work for him.

Not anymore.

"That's why I feel Charizard's pain when he fights," Alain said, still staring at his hand. "And Charizard can feel mine. So if either of us dies..."

"Then you both perish, yes. But if just one of you can slay your foe, you both win. Bonds can be a source of pain when they are severed, but they make us stronger than we can ever be alone. A true master of Mega Evolution embraces both sides. But before he can do so, he must embrace himself first. And I believe," he looked pointedly at Alain, then at Korrina, "that you have both come to understand that a bit better since you began working together."

Alain looked to Korrina and smirked. "Yeah, can't argue with that."

"Grandpa," Korrina said. "Don't tell me that's why you wanted me to train Alain personally? You never said a word!"

Gurkinn chuckled. "If I had, you never would have agreed, my dear. I know you have been searching for a way to master Mega Evolution with Lucario, but you must have known in your heart that your methods were flawed. You were so focused on your own development, on flaws you imagined were weighing you down, that you lost sight of the point of Mega Evolution entirely. And you," he turned back to Alain, "were so focused on Charizard that you lost yourself and every other connection you have ever made."

An image of Mairin's face, tear-strewn and red with grief and anger, appeared in Alain's mind just then, and his stomach churned uncomfortably.

I lost you, didn't I?

"*You did this!"* Mairin screamed at him, her cute and carefree expression warped with betrayal.

But before he could slip back into those tortured memories, Korrina's voice pulled him back to the present. She sighed and pulled her fingers through her hair. "Wow, thanks for letting me down easy, Grandpa. Some Mega Evolution master I turned out to be."

Alain gaped at her. "Seriously? Korrina, have you even seen me lately? I'm like a totally different guy from the one who landed on your beach back then." He took her by the shoulders. "Everything I accomplished is because of *you*. If that doesn't make you a master, then there's no such thing."

Gurkinn smiled. "Alain is right. Even a master may lose sight of her goal at times, but you've found exactly what you needed to get back on track. And if you want proof, then see for yourself."

He returned to the doorway and accessed a control pad next to the door, where he keyed in a number code. All of a sudden, the pedestal above began to lower on a series of thick cords and pulleys until it was at waist height in the center of the tower roof. Alain and Korrina stepped back, and he could not help but gawk. Atop the pedestal was a grapefruit-sized gemstone that shimmered in every color imaginable under the moonlight.

"This is..." Alain stammered. "The light I saw when I came here. This was it?"

"That's right," Gurkinn said. "But it's no ordinary stone. In fact, this is what some call—"

"A Mega Stone," Alain interrupted. "That's a Mega Stone."

"How did you know?" Korrina asked, genuinely surprised.

Alain shook his head. "Because I saw one in Hoenn. Except that one was about four stories tall."

"Goodness, is that so?" Gurkinn said. "Incredible. They are quite rare.

This one was discovered by my own grandfather, the man who discovered Mega Evolution."

Alain could not believe what he was seeing. All this time and it was right here, this stone that Lysandre had sent him halfway across the world to hunt down, pitting him against Champion Steven Stone and endangering both his life and Mairin's in the process. All this time, and there was one right here in Kalos. If Lysandre only knew...

Korrina reached for the stone, and when she touched it, all the colors blended together and fused into a rich, chestnut glow. It burst from the Mega Stone, and it coiled around her body, concentrated around her hands and feet like small cyclones. "Grandpa..."

"The Mega Stone recognizes those who have the capacity to master Mega Evolution," Gurkinn said, the pride evident in his tone. "Look how rich the color is compared to last year when you touched it. You have truly become strong, Korrina."

Korrina stared at the glowing crystal, mesmerized by its coppery glow. But after another moment, she withdrew. Her smile was subdued but genuine as she turned to Alain. "Go on. Try it."

The Mega Stone had reverted to its multicolored state as soon as Korrina broke her contact. Alain touched his scarred hand to it, and suddenly the colors swirled once more. But this time, instead of combining into earthy chestnut, they pulsed a bloody crimson.

"There, you see?" Gurkinn said. "The Mega Stone recognizes you."

The lurid light reflected in Korrina's eyes. "So Titans are red. Kinda creepy."

Alain said nothing as he focused all his attention on the stone. It heated up under his fingers, and as soon as he made contact with it, the red light it emitted swept up his arm and coated his body. Phantom wings grew from his shoulders, half as long as he was tall and flickering like fire. Red wings.

But as soon as he saw them, he knew they'd been there all along. Like a memory he'd forgotten until just now. Red wings... Why did it seem so familiar?

"Oh, wow," Korrina said. "Are those...wings?"

"That's your Aura," Gurkinn said. "One of the Mega Stone's powers.

You saw Korrina's Bellatrix Aura just a moment ago through the power of the Mega Stone. Normally, most people cannot see Auras, but the Mega Stone makes them visible to all."

"My...Aura..."

Alain let his hand drop, and the red mist around him instantly dissipated, taking his wings with it.

"It's always there," Gurkinn went on. "Some Tamers can see it without a Mega Stone, like the Mediums. Curious, isn't it?"

"How does it do that? Why?"

"Hm, that's a good question. My grandfather devoted his life to studying Mega Evolution and this stone when he discovered it. He theorized that the Mega Stone itself was crafted from the Auras of many Tamers, which might explain its reaction to us."

"Crafted? How?"

Korrina crossed her arms. "How do you think? Something like this... I'm sure Tamers and Pokémon died because of it. It lures people here, people who want to steal the secrets of Mega Evolution. Grandpa and I keep it hidden, but people still come."

"You think...it ate their Auras?"

Korrina watched the Mega Stone with a grim expression, deep in thought. "I don't know. All I know is that anyone who's ever come here looking for it always had a shady agenda. Anything that attracts that kind of attention can't be harmless. You're one of the only people who's ever come here and didn't try to get ahold of it."

"Why not just get rid of it if it's so much trouble? You could bury it."

Gurkinn sighed. "This Mega Stone is my grandfather's legacy to Mega Evolution. I cannot abide discarding it when there is a chance another will come upon it and use it inappropriately."

"Wait, hold on." Alain crossed his arms. "You make it sound like this thing can do some real damage. It's just a rock."

Korrina and Gurkinn looked between each other.

"You don't know?" Korrina asked.

"Know what?"

"The Mega Stone's what made my ancestor's Lucario Mega Evolve for the first time. It can force Mega Evolution on a Pokémon. That's the rumor some people come here looking to prove. We do what we can to deter them, but if anyone ever found out it was true, well, you can probably fill in the blanks."

Alain's mind was transported back to Hoenn in a split second. He was at a dig site where a team of a hundred archeologists and diggers had come together under Steven Stone's direction to excavate what was known to some as a Mega Stone. But just when they'd managed to dig it up and bring in the cranes to transport it back to a laboratory, the skies turned black and the winds picked up to hurricane speeds, killing some and wounding many, Alain included. And through the black clouds, Alain had seen it. A legendary Dragon, the Keeper of the Heavens, the fabled Rayquaza he'd heard stories about growing up as a clan Titan. Its body seemed to take up the entire sky, endless and serpentine, and it had tried to gobble up the Mega Stone.

"Alain? You look like you've seen a Ghost." Korrina was shaking him by the shoulder. "Hey, are you okay?"

He blinked, and the memories faded again. "Uh, sorry, I'm okay."

"Alain, I'm sure this goes without saying," Gurkinn said. "I'm trusting you with this secret. It is our duty to keep the Mega Stone hidden and guarded. It is for this reason my grandfather built this tower and named himself Gym Leader, so that our family could carry on the responsibility for generations to come. We protect Shalour City by keeping the Mega Stone hidden away."

Alain swallowed hard, suddenly cold. He'd betrayed the last person who'd trusted him. As though sensing his doubt, Korrina took his hand lightly in hers and squeezed.

"I trust you with it, too," she said. "There's no one I'd rather ask."

Alain tried to say something—thanks, you can count on me, I won't tell anyone—anything at all, but the words lodged in his throat and would have been redundant, anyway. She had said everything already.

"Korrina..." He touched his fingers to her hair, gentle.

She grinned, reading his unspoken thoughts and feelings.

"Now then," Gurkinn said. "Let's eat. I've taken the liberty of ordering something special. Consider it a feast in honor of everything you both have accomplished these past months."

Korrina laughed. "Grandpa, you're so sentimental."

"Well, once in a while it's all right, don't you think?"

Korrina linked her arm with Gurkinn's and headed for the roof access doorway. He keyed in the code for the Mega Stone, and the pedestal rose back up to its former position far out of reach. Alain gazed up at it, the beacon of light that had guided him here. If not for that Mega Stone, he never would have come here. He never would have met Korrina and Gurkinn. He never would have seen the smoky wings growing out of his shoulders.

Wings, huh?

A girl's shy smile, one he hadn't thought of in a very long time, popped into his head like an old photograph rediscovered by coincidence. Serena would be a grown woman by now. He wondered what had become of her, if she still spent her time at Sycamore's lab. If she'd learned more about her Magus abilities. Alain put a hand over his shoulder where the crimson wings rose off him, invisible to all.

"*You always find me so fast."*

"'*Cause your wings stick out. There!"* Don't you see them?

He laughed to himself.

"Hey Titan, you coming or what? I'll eat your portion if you don't hurry up," Korrina called from the doorway.

"Yeah, I'm coming."

Korrina gave him a weird look. "Don't think too hard. You're more of an action guy."

"Oh, yeah? Does that mean you take back what you said about being embarrassed about me ruining your tough Bellatrix image?"

"Don't push it."

"Admit it, you think I'm awesome."

"I think I'm seriously gonna eat your portion if you keep that up."

"You got the hots for me so bad, Korrina, don't lie."

"Please, your ass is so flat from falling on it all the time. I need a little substance, you know?"

Alain bit back a smirk and casually slipped his hand over her butt. "Yeah, I think I know what you mean."

Korrina gasped and jumped a good foot in the air. Alain didn't even have time to burst out laughing when she grabbed his wandering hand and twisted the wrist hard enough to hurt. "You shithead! You scared me!"

It hurt, but Alain could not help but laugh. "*That's* why you're upset? So you *do* have the hots for me, huh?"

She let him go and marched down the stairs ahead of him, grumbling curses. Gurkinn had long headed downstairs before them. Alain shook out his hand. It was a little sore, but she hadn't done any real damage.

"It's not like it's one-sided!" he called after her, still laughing.

Calem had another day to recover after Grace had gone with Sycamore to meet Lysandre, but he was so wound up and anxious about Serena and the leads they had that he hardly got the rest he really needed. He was going with Grace and Sycamore to Shalour City, and that was that. He was an adult, and he could make his own choices.

Now, with his arms still bandaged for protection as the muscles continued to heal, Calem touched down in Shalour on his Staraptor next to Grace and Sycamore, who had already recalled their Flyers—a pair of Pidgeot Sycamore usually kept at the lab for such purposes. Grace watched Calem silently, unsure what to make of this scrawny young man with atrophied limbs and a sword more than half his height strapped to his back who was risking everything to help her only daughter. Fletchling tweeted on Grace's shoulder, perhaps sensing her unease about the situation.

"So, where's this Tower of Mastery, Professor?" Calem asked.

Klefki jingled next to his head, fired up as ever now that Calem seemed to be feeling better.

"It's across the bay to the north," Sycamore said. "It's not far."

"Good."

Calem started toward town, not waiting for them. Sycamore and Grace walked a little ways behind him, and Sycamore sighed.

"I wish his parents had made it back in time to see him before we left. Maybe they could have talked him down. I don't think he's quite ready to jump into whatever awaits us."

"Most children do what their parents ask of them," Grace said. "But the ones who don't won't budge no matter what you tell them. Believe me, Augustine. There's no way Calem would have changed his mind even if his parents had seen him before we left."

Shalour was a city, but it was miniscule compared to Lumiose. The streets were clean and people, including families with young children, happily meandered the sidewalks and stopped in restaurants or shopped together. The sky was clear, the sun was high, and the air was pleasantly warm. It was like Grace had touched down on a different planet after the past few days in Lumiose.

Sycamore smiled. "Hm, I suppose you would know. Still, it worked out for the best."

"What do you mean?"

"There's nothing like love to motivate people into doing extraordinary things. I wonder what Serena would say if she knew what you and Calem have already done for her?"

"I'll be sure to ask her when we've found her and brought her home."

Sycamore smiled wider. "That's the spirit. Okay! Let's not let Calem show us up. Hey, Calem! Slow down, will you? I'm an old man back here!"

Fletchling tweeted and cocked its little head.

"He better be right about his acquaintance," Grace said to herself.

She didn't know what she would do if this didn't pan out, if they weren't able to locate Serena. Worse, she didn't know what Calem would do.

"Hurry up, Professor," Calem said up ahead. "The sooner we get there, the sooner we can figure out how to find Serena."

"I agree, but you should also try to take it easy while you can. Don't overexert yourself, please."

"I'm fine."

Grace caught up to them and eyed Calem's bandaged arms. "No, you're not. Can you even lift your sword?"

Calem looked a little surprised and hurt to hear such words from Grace, but he recovered quickly and stared resolutely ahead. "Aegislash's a Ghost. She's not as heavy as she looks."

"Still, Grace makes an excellent point. I know how much you favor Aegislash in battle, but you may have to rethink your usual strategies now," Sycamore said.

"Of course I'm thinking about that."

Klefki sensed Calem's dour mood and jingled angrily up at Sycamore as if to reprimand him for his common sense.

"Well, as long as you understand your own limitations, then you'll figure out how to get around them," Grace said.

Calem's frown deepened, but he said nothing further. Grace could not forget the sight of him wielding Aegislash against Malva's Pyroar, and how his other Pokémon leaped to his aid despite their disadvantage. She was sure that if he faced Malva again as he was, he could lose more than the use of his arms. But still...

"I'm sure you can do it," she added softly, staring straight ahead. "Serena would say so, too."

She could feel Calem's eyes on her face, but if she looked now she was sure she would lose her nerve right there. How ridiculous. Calem was not her son, and she barely knew him outside of what Serena told her. And yet, she believed her words. Anyone who could stand up to a terror like Malva, knowing he would likely die and yet still fighting to help the person he loved, could find a way.

"Thanks," Calem muttered. "That...means a lot."

Sycamore pointed straight ahead. "There it is, the Tower of Mastery. It's just over the bridge on the other side of the bay."

Grace held up a hand over her eyes to shield them from the sun. The

tower was built of stone and wood and taller than the buildings in Shalour City. At the top, the roof ended in a conical point, almost like a lighthouse, but there was no beacon she could see. Fletchling hopped onto her head to get a better look.

"Finally. Let's get over there." Calem took off again.

The rest of the walk to the Tower of Mastery was short as Calem led the charge at a jog. His Cyclops sword opened its eye to look back at Grace and Sycamore, and she was sure she could see some kind of faint violet haze rising off it. Fletchling chirped noisily after Calem and Aegislash, perhaps just as agitated as Grace about the sword's peeping.

There were some people outside in the grass and on the sandy beach when Grace arrived on the small island where the Tower of Mastery stood. Some were sparring using some kind of martial arts, though Grace was not familiar with the sport and could not identify the style. Pokémon were with them, all Fighters, she noticed. Perhaps this Gym specialized in the Fighting type. All the trainers stopped what they were doing when they noticed the three strangers approach.

"Who's in charge here?" Calem demanded of the nearest person, a young blonde woman in sweat-stained workout clothes.

She gave Calem a once-over, and her eyes lingered on Klefki and finally Aegislash on his back. Her expression turned from mild surprise to suspicion, and she went for a Pokéball at her hip. "Who's asking?"

Sycamore and Grace caught up with Calem just as the other trainers gathered behind the blonde woman. "Wait just a moment, please. My name is Augustine Sycamore. We're here to see the Gym Leader. It's quite the emergency."

The woman did not look convinced. "The Gym Leader, you say?"

"Yes, that's right. See, we're old acquaintances and we really need some help."

The woman popped open her Pokéball, and a Lucario materialized within the light. It crouched next to her, its large ears erect and twitching. Grace took a step back. She had never seen a Lucario in person, but they were lauded as very tough Fighters, among the strongest of their type. Her eyes fell to the wicked spikes on its paws, and she swallowed.

"Oh, really? But I don't know you," the woman went on.

Lucario sniffed the air and rose up on its hind legs. Its red eyes were trained on Calem, and its bushy tail swished. Klefki jingled worriedly, and Calem shushed the little Fairy.

"Hm?" The blonde looked between Lucario and Calem and back again. "Oh, I get it. You're a Steel Adamantine."

Aegislash floated off Calem's back of its own accord and hovered in a striking position next to him. Its tattered ribbon feelers wrapped around his right arm over his bandages, and its lone eye swiveled to focus on Lucario.

"Careful," the woman said. "I'm a Bellatrix. I'm the last person you wanna pick a fight with."

More Tamers, Grace thought.

"No one is fighting anyone." Sycamore came in between Calem and Lucario and spread his arms. "Please, we just need to speak with the Gym Leader, that's all."

The woman laid a hand on Lucario's shoulder. "You're looking at her."

Grace's jaw went slack. This woman was the Gym Leader? She looked so young! She could not have been more than a few years older than Serena and Calem. And yet now that she had said it aloud, Grace knew it to be true. The other trainers and their Pokémon remained behind her, deferring to her leadership. Even the way she held herself, poised but not ostentatious, confident but careful with her Pokémon close by, spoke of someone who was used to leading and confronting adversity.

A Bellatrix... She must be something incredible.

"What? But what happened to Master Gurkinn?" Sycamore prattled on.

"Grandpa? He's still here, of course. But I took over his duties almost five years ago."

Five years ago?!

Grace had half a mind yank Calem to the ground to apologize for potentially having offended this Gym Leader. Surely, he would not stand a chance if she chose to engage him.

"Huh? Wait a minute, does that mean... You couldn't be Korrina, could you?"

Korrina crossed her arms. "That's me. Sorry, but who were you again?"

"Oh my god, you've really grown up! I can't even believe it! Why, the last time I saw you, I was still a college student, and you were just a little girl. You were still missing some teeth!" Sycamore gushed.

Korrina gave him a weird look. "Um..."

Grace sighed and stepped forward. "Listen, we weren't kidding about this being an emergency. This Gurkinn, your grandfather, we need to speak with him immediately. It's about my daughter. Please."

Korrina's expression fell, and she assessed them all once more. "All right. Grandpa's having his afternoon tea right now. You can wait inside while I get him. But you." She turned to Calem. "Get that Aegislash under control. I don't like it."

Calem looked about ready to protest, and Aegislash hummed as it reached for Korrina and Lucario, only its ribbons connecting it to Calem's sword arm.

"Excellent," Sycamore said. "I appreciate you being so accommodating."

Korrina led them inside the Gym and up to the second floor, where she had them all sit in the living room to wait. Lucario remained out of its Pokéball and quietly eyed Calem in a way that reminded Grace a little of Sylveon. Perhaps it was curious. Perhaps it was plotting Calem's murder by disembowelment. It was anyone's guess.

Calem had not recalled Aegislash. Ghosts could not be confined to Pokéballs, she had learned. All the more reason to remain vigilant around them. The sentient sword and shield hovered just beyond Calem in its defensive stance, while Klefki buzzed about the living room drinking in its new and unfamiliar surroundings. Fletchling tweeted and hopped off Grace's shoulder to follow it, but whenever it got too close to Lucario, Fletchling hopped back to put some distance between them. Klefki seemed to feel no such hesitation and happily jingled in Lucario's face, only to be swatted away.

"But I'll be darned," Sycamore said while the three of them sat around a coffee table in the living room. "I'm shocked that Korrina's been the Gym Leader for years. I always assumed she would take over, but not

so soon. Time sure flies."

"This Gurkinn person," Calem said. "How can he help us find Serena?"

"Ah, well you see, Master Gurkinn is a veteran of Mega Evolution. In fact, did you know that his ancestor was the person who discovered Mega Evolution? Their family has a long history with the phenomenon. So if anyone can shed some light on the connection between Mega Evolution and Serena, Master Gurkinn can."

Something shattered from the kitchen behind Grace and the others, and they all got up to look.

"That was an antique!" Korrina blurted out. "Alain, what the hell's wrong with you?"

Korrina bent down to scoop up the remains of a shattered teacup on the kitchen floor where she had returned with a very old man with the longest mustachios Grace had ever seen and a young guy who looked like he'd just donated half his blood supply. The spark of recognition flickered in the back of Grace's mind, but in the split second that passed, Sycamore beat her to it.

"Oh my god," he said, sounding out of breath. "Alain? Is that really you?"

"P-Professor Sycamore?" Alain said, white as a sheet but slowly recovering. His hand remained out in front of him as though he were still holding the cup he'd dropped.

Gurkinn walked around Korrina as she stood up and headed into the living room. "Professor, welcome. It is good to see you. From the look on Alain's face, I take it I am not the only one who feels this way."

"You know them?" Korrina asked Alain.

Alain, that's right, Grace thought. His name had popped up more than a couple times lately, and not in an entirely innocuous context.

"Yeah," Alain said. "Remember I told you I used to work for a professor in Lumiose City?"

"Wait, *that* guy's a professor?"

"I suppose we've all learned our lesson today about books and covers, Gym Leader Korrina," Sycamore said not unkindly. His prayer beads

tinkled pleasantly as he clasped his hands in front of him.

"You're Gurkinn? The one who knows about Mega Evolution?" Grace said suddenly.

Gurkinn nodded. He was old with a gentle voice, but there was nothing kind about his eyes. They were the eyes of a soldier, someone who had seen death and even dealt it. "That's correct. And may I ask who you are and what your interest is in Mega Evolution?"

"I'm Grace Gabena. I'm here about my daughter. Augustine said you would know about Mega Evolution, and we were hoping whatever you know will help."

"Serena?" Alain said. "Right, you're Serena's mother, Grace. Did something happen to her? Where is she?"

Grace was about to answer him when all of a sudden, Calem marched across the living room with Aegislash secured to his right arm and aimed the sword directly at Alain.

"*You*," he snarled. "Don't you *dare* speak her name!"

A few things happened in the next two and a half seconds. First, Aegislash changed stance to its offensive position. At almost the same time, Korrina shoved Alain out of the way and into the kitchen counter, where he bumped his hip and spun back out of her way just as she tossed out a new Pokéball. A Blaziken roared to life in the light, feathers standing on end as it caught Aegislash's scent and killer intent, and squawked menacingly. Lucario bounded up behind Calem but did not get too close, ready to move on Korrina's command. Sycamore made an incoherent gasping sound and reached for the nexus of hostility, but didn't get more than a step or two before Gurkinn blocked his way. Grace watched it all unfold with Fletchling.

"...Calem," Alain said. "I didn't even recognize you."

"Shut up! I'm not a kid anymore, and my sword's more than a match for you, Titan."

"Calem, what are you *doing*?!" Sycamore cried out.

"I thought I told you to put that sword away," Korrina hissed. "You've got five seconds, then Blaziken melts it."

Blaziken flexed its talon fists and filled the short silence with an awful

clicking, like metal on stone, that nearly sent Grace collapsing back into her chair. Calem ignored the Fighter parrot entirely.

"What happened to Serena?" Alain said, attempting to remain calm.

"Like you don't know," Calem spat. "You're one of the only people who knew her secret, and now I'm supposed to believe it's a coincidence you're here? Fuck that."

Calem's sword arm was shaking, and his knuckles were white as he gripped Aegislash's hilt with all his might. Korrina was eyeing the floating sword, calculating. Any moment now, and someone's fuse would reach its end.

"Korrina, please withdraw. There has clearly been a misunderstanding," Gurkinn said.

"That's for damn sure," Korrina said, though she did not call off Blaziken or Lucario.

Klefki buzzed around Calem and chose to jangle angrily at Alain from behind the safety of Aegislash's blade.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Alain tried again. "Listen, just call off your Aegislash and tell me what's wrong."

Calem glared daggers at Alain, but he said nothing. Grace finally recovered from the horror of Korrina's Blaziken and, careless of both Sycamore and Gurkinn in her way, pushed past them and Lucario until she arrived at Calem's side. Gently, she laid a hand on his sword arm, careful not to touch Aegislash's feeler ribbons. He was quaking badly.

"Calem," she said softly but forcefully, "you're bleeding."

As though the spell had been broken, Calem looked down at his arm. His bandages were soaked through with red in patches, and his blood was beginning to seep into Aegislash's ribbons. Klefki zoomed toward his face and jingled its keys as the scent of blood reached its keen nose. Blaziken clicked its curved beak, also affected by the stench, but it remained still under Korrina's order.

Calem's fingers slipped, no longer able to hold up the sword in his weakened state. Aegislash floated on its own and backed off, resuming its defensive stance with the golden shield over its blade. Only then did Korrina wave off Blaziken and Lucario.

"Calem!" Sycamore came rushing forward to get a look at him. "Damnit, the burn boils are discharging. I'll need to disinfect the wounds and change your dressings. Gym Leader Korrina, do you have an infirmary here at the Gym?"

"Yeah," Korrina said. "I'll take you there myself."

Calem was staring at his ruined arms with a vacant look, like he wasn't really seeing them, and Grace was overcome with the sudden urge to hold him the way she used to hold Serena when something was wrong but Serena chose to keep her silence.

"Perhaps we can get the young man patched up, and then we'll resume this conversation without the Pokémon," Gurkinn said.

"Yes, I agree. Come on, Calem, before the bandages soak through completely," Sycamore said.

Korrina and Alain shared a few whispered words that Grace could not make out, and then she gestured for Calem and Sycamore to follow her back downstairs. Lucario followed Korrina, but Blaziken remained and stalked toward Gurkinn, where it sat down cross-legged on the floor near him and began to primp its feathers. Fletchling tweeted at it experimentally, but the little bird only received a cursory glance for its efforts and was promptly ignored.

"That was excellent foresight," Gurkinn commented. "You said exactly the right thing to calm him down."

Grace pursed her lips. "We didn't come here to start a fight. He needs to rest."

Gurkinn ran a wrinkled hand through Blaziken's feathered headdress, much to Grace's horror, but the Fighter parrot didn't seem to mind. In fact, the rumbling coo it emitted sounded almost pleasant.

"Now, I would like to sit down with the professor and that young man, but while we wait, I would very much appreciate it if you could tell me what the problem is." Gurkinn gestured to the couches and took a seat himself. "You mentioned that your coming here has something to do with your daughter?"

Alain wandered into the living room but gave Blaziken a healthy berth to take a seat on Gurkinn's other side across from Grace. She spared him a glance, wondering at the uncanny coincidence that the only other person who knew Serena's secret could be here, of all places.

"Yes," Grace said, fighting to keep her voice steady. "My daughter, Serena. She's been kidnapped."

"What?" Alain gasped.

Gurkinn shook his head. "That is terrible. The pain of losing a child... Sadly, I am not ignorant of it."

Alain shot Gurkinn a look, but Grace didn't bother reading into it too much. "We're here because we found out that the woman responsible has some interest in Mega Evolution. I don't know the details, Augustine can explain it better. But he was convinced that you might be able to help me find Serena if you can tell us why Malva's interested in Mega Evolution."

"Malva?"

Alain had gone deathly pale again, and this time Grace did turn her attention to him.

"Yes, the Ignifera who abducted Serena in the middle of the night." The tears were becoming too hard to hold back as the traumatic memories of that night revisited her as clearly as though they were happening all over again. "Calem fought her off, but it wasn't enough. That's why he's injured. She burned his arms all the way down to the bone with her bare hands. I've never seen anything like it."

Without warning, Alain snatched Grace's hand across the table and held it firm. His sparkling blue eyes were wide with fear and something dark, something primal beyond fear and beyond hunger. In that moment, Grace had the most unsettling thought that he was no longer human with his cold touch, sharp incisors, and a face with angles so sharp it could only be described as a mask of skin stretched over the skull of a beast.

"Malva," he said again. "I know her. I fought her."

The room seemed to blend together in a time suck as all Grace could focus on were those words and the feeling of his hand on her wrist, like a snake coiling around her, its scales pinching her skin.

"You *know* her?"

"I know her," Alain repeated. "And I can help you. I'll help you find Serena."

Korrina sat on an empty gurney across from Calem as Sycamore cleaned and rewrapped his arms. Calem's Aegislash hovered in her defensive stance just behind him, and Klefki looked on worriedly at Sycamore's work. When Korrina saw for herself the extent of the damage in Calem's arms, she had to look away in shock. His burns were tremendous, having left deep craters in his skin and muscles down to the bone that now filled with awful boils, many of which had burst and leaked a yellow curdled discharge.

Sycamore, wearing a mask and gloves, dutifully cleaned the raw burns with disinfectant and applied a sticky blue paste from a tube he'd pulled out of his bag. "Rawst berry salve," he explained, more to fill the silence than to inform. "It's much more effective as a topical treatment than Burn Heal."

Korrina was no medic, but even she could tell those burns were no ordinary wounds. A little Rawst berry paste wouldn't heal Calem's arms back to normal. Despite his earlier behavior, she felt sorry for him. No one deserved to suffer like that.

"Just wrap them up again, Professor," Calem said, gritting his teeth to the pain. His forehead was clammy and dark circles began to form under his eyes as he did his best to stay calm. "I'll be fine."

Klefki jingled frantically as if to say, 'No, you're *not* fine, silly human!' Lucario stayed by Korrina's side, silent and watchful, but he wrinkled his nose at the stench of the pus oozing from Calem's burn blisters.

"Hey, Professor," Korrina said. "Would a Full Restore do him any good?"

Sycamore gaped at her like a fish. "*Would* it! Full Restore would stimulate cellular regeneration and bolster the Rawst berry salve to mitigate the effects of the burns. But they're very expensive and in short supply. Even the Lumiose Hospital only keeps a few on hand for the truly hopeless emergencies."

Korrina slid off the stretcher and went to the cabinet over the sink. The infirmary was nothing more than a single room attached to the Gym on the main floor divided up with hanging curtains for privacy. Its walls were painted a pale blue, supposedly soothing, and a medic served on call from Shalour General Hospital. The medic was not here now, but Korrina had spent enough time in here to know her way around.

"We've had this for a long time, but we've never had a reason to use it.

Most injuries that happen here at the Gym are surface wounds or broken bones, nothing a regular Super Potion can't handle with time." She found what she was looking for and held it out to Sycamore. "I'm pretty sure they don't expire, so it should work fine."

Sycamore made a muffled gasping sound and accepted the round glass bottle with shaking hands. The lime green liquid emitted a faintly neon glow. "I-Incredible! This is an honest to goodness Full Restore! Gym Leader Korrina!"

Korrina frowned and put up a hand. "Just Korrina is fine, you know."

Sycamore clutched the Full Restore to his chest and nearly burst into tears right there. "Korrina, of course. I don't know if you realize just how much this will help Calem. There's no better healing potion than a Full Restore. Thank you so much."

When he bent over at the waist in a bow, Korrina backed up. "Hey, cut that out! It's no big deal. No one else was using it."

"Ah! An IV drip. I need an IV drip to attach this."

Sycamore completely forgot about Korrina and looked around the small infirmary. In a matter of minutes, he'd found an IV stand and a fresh bag, into which he emptied the Full Restore. He then hooked up the bag to a feeding tube.

"This medicine is very potent," he prattled on. "It can work miracles if it's used correctly. Brilliant, just brilliant."

With everything hooked up, he attached the feeding tube to the back of Calem's hand with a sterilized needle. With fresh bandages and the Full Restore drip, Calem slipped off the edge of his stretcher and tested his feet.

"Well?" Korrina said. "Is it working?"

Sycamore smiled. "It will take some time, but I think we should begin to see the effects by tonight as long as you don't start any more sword fights."

Calem looked up at the full bag of neon green liquid slowly emptying into his bloodstream. Then he looked at Korrina. "...Thanks," he managed. "He only gets like this when it's something really big."

"Yes, thank you, Korrina. You could have sold this Full Restore and

financed a full remodeling of your Gym, so thank you for holding onto it."

Korrina froze. Just how much was that stupid potion worth? She crossed her arms. "Be happy you told me that after I already handed it over. I've been meaning to update the Gym's interior for months now."

Calem approached her, dragging the IV stand behind him. Lucario perked up, alert but cautious, and Korrina laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Listen, Korrina," he began. "I'm... I was out of line upstairs. I'm not usually like that."

"Coulda fooled me."

He didn't flinch at her flippancy, and yet again she wondered what the hell this kid had been through.

"I take it you know Alain," she went on. "He's never said a word about you."

Calem's expression warped into a sneer at the mention of Alain. "No, he wouldn't remember me. He never had time for anyone but himself."

"Oh, really? It looked like he remembered you just fine once you started picking a fight. Wanna tell me what that's about? Does it have something to do with those freakish burns on your arms?"

"Actually, yes," Sycamore interrupted. "But let me suggest we head back upstairs. This is a conversation I'd like your grandfather and Grace to be a part of, too."

What the hell did these people get mixed up in?

But she was eager to get back to Alain and Gurkinn and get to the bottom of whatever this was, so she led Calem and Sycamore back upstairs. Calem's Aegislash floated behind him, and Korrina could not shake the crawling sensation on her back like the Ghost sword was peering into her soul. How could he stand having that thing around?

Grace, Alain, and Gurkinn were seated on the sofas and chairs in the living room deep in conversation, but they stopped when Korrina came back with the others. Alain stood up.

"Calem, you're okay," he said.

Calem glared back at Alain, but before he could say anything, Grace

beat him to it.

"Calem, Augustine. Alain just told me that he knows Malva personally and he'll help us find Serena."

"Malva?" Korrina said.

"I knew it," Calem said, his previous anger returning. "You *are* involved!"

"Wait a minute, it's not what you think," Alain said.

Sycamore joined them on the couches. "Alain, what's this about? How could you know Malva?"

"Because I fought her as part of one of Lysandre's Mega Evolution experiments. She had a Mega Houndoom at the time. I thought for sure she must've died after Mega Charizard killed Mega Houndoom."

"Hold on, what? This woman survived the death of her Mega Pokémon? That's impossible," Korrina said.

"Not exactly," Gurkinn said. "If either the Tamer or the Pokémon has the strength to break the Mega Evolution bond in time, the one who was not fatally wounded may survive, in theory. But then, one of them must watch as the other takes in the pain of two deaths instead of one. It's an abominable trade-off."

Korrina tensed as a shiver of dread ran down her spine just thinking about such a fate. Lucario remained next to her, steady as ever, and felt her gaze. Just the thought of doing something so gruesome to Lucario made her sick. How could this Malva, whoever she was, justify such cruelty?

"Alain," Sycamore said. "Does this mean you're still working with Team Flare after all?"

Alain bared his teeth. "No, I'm through with Lysandre. I'm never going back."

"Not even for Mairin?"

The room fell silent as Alain and Sycamore faced off. Korrina had never seen Alain look so unsure of himself. Mairin... That was the little girl he'd told her about, the one he felt he'd betrayed when he left Lumiose City.

"Mairin," Grace said, frowning. "That little girl we met at Lysandre's?"

"So she stayed with him," Alain said more to himself than to the other people in the room. He clenched his fists and let his head fall. "Damnit."

"Hey, not to spoil what looks to me like a really shitty reunion," Korrina said, "but how about you tell us why you're all here and what you want."

"Yes, an excellent idea," Gurkinn said. "Grace, perhaps you could start with what happened to you daughter. I would like Korrina to hear the story from the beginning."

Grace nodded and wrung her hands in her lap. Korrina sat down, and Sycamore pulled over a chair for Calem to sit next to his IV stand as far from Alain as possible. For the next twenty minutes, Korrina listened as first Grace then Sycamore relayed the events leading up to their appearance at the Tower of Mastery. By the end of it, she regretted the way she'd greeted them when they arrived earlier.

"So Serena, your daughter, was kidnapped by Malva, who's with Team Flare," Korrina said, putting it all together. "And Alain, you used to work for Team Flare but not anymore, and you once fought against Malva and killed her Mega Houndom, but she miraculously survived. Okay, I get all that. But why come here? Alain already told you he thought Malva was dead, so how're we supposed to help?"

Sycamore leaned forward over his knees and clasped his hands. The many prayer beads and bracelets he wore tinkled softly and drew Klefki's attention, who had been mostly sticking close to Calem and Aegislash this entire time. Alain eyed the Keychain Pokémon suspiciously.

"When we learned about Malva potentially conducting some kind of study on Mega Evolution, I decided the best person to ask would be Master Gurkinn."

"Sure, okay, but I still don't see what that has to do with Serena," Korrina said.

"It's got everything to do with her." Calem spoke for the first time since Sycamore and Grace brought everyone up to speed on the situation. He was staring at the coffee table as though he were sleepwalking. "Malva wanted Serena because of what she is. Serena's a Magus." He looked up at Alain. "But you already knew that."

Korrina quickly put the pieces together. "Wait, seriously? A living Magus? You knew about this?"

"I promised to keep the secret when Serena first showed up at the lab, and I *did*," Alain bit out. "Besides, didn't you guys say it was Dexio who talked to Malva? Shouldn't you be grilling him about where Serena might be?"

"I already did," Calem said. "Plenty."

"I left Dexio in Gym Leader Clemont's custody," Sycamore said. "But he didn't know anything about Serena's whereabouts or Malva's plans."

"You said you knew Malva even though you thought she died," Grace said suddenly. "Alain, don't you remember anything that might be helpful? You're the only one with ties to Team Flare. There must be something."

Alain rubbed his eyes and hung his head in his hands to think. After a moment, he looked up again. "Malva could use Mega Evolution, that's why Lysandre valued her. And Lysandre's always been interested in Mega Evolution. That's... It's why he sent me to Hoenn to find the Mega Stone."

"Yeah, you told us about that," Korrina said.

"I didn't tell you that Lysandre had the thing shipped back to Lumiose City."

"*What*?" Sycamore said, aghast. "Lysandre did what?"

"He transported the monolith, a huge Mega Stone, to Kalos and put it in the lab in Lumiose for further study. He said he wanted to harness the energy that catalyzes Mega Evolution in Pokémon. And I helped him do it."

Sycamore got up abruptly and towered over Alain. "What the hell is wrong with you?! How could you be a part of something like that? We know next to nothing about these so-called Mega Stones, and you thought it was just fine to bring an enormous one to the most populous city in Kalos? Alain, what were you *thinking*?!"

Korrina was taken aback at Sycamore's angry paroxysm. He did not seem the type to ever raise his voice, must less become vocally angry.

Alain didn't even try to fight him. "I wasn't thinking."

"You're damn right you weren't! My god, is this who you really are? Is this who you left my lab to become?"

"Professor..."

"Alain, I am *so* disappointed in you."

"Don't be," Calem said softly. "He's a Titan, and Titans always lie."

Korrina got up and confronted Calem. "*You* shut the fuck up. I don't care if you're injured or what, but you don't get to come into *my* Gym and say shit you know nothing about, you got that?"

Calem leaned back in his chair, caught off guard.

"And you," Korrina turned on Sycamore. "Whatever you think Alain did or didn't do, it's in the past. He's been here with me for the past several months getting the crap beat outta him to make up for whatever he was involved in before, and you're not gonna stand there and take that away from him. He's worked way too hard for you all to come in here all of a sudden and accuse him of things he hasn't done. You obviously don't know him at all."

Blaziken, who had been sitting next to Gurkinn, got up while Korrina went on a tirade and had begun to smoke from his feathered mane in warning.

"Alain," Korrina said. "Don't look at me like that, idiot." His eyes were wide like she'd just knocked him on his ass on the mat again. "Quit catching flies and tell them if there's anything else you know about Malva or whatever."

Alain swallowed hard, but she glared down at him in challenge, daring him to chicken out. Whatever he'd done in the past, Alain was too hard on himself, that much Korrina knew. And she trusted him. If he said he had nothing to do with what had happened to Serena, then she believed him. Titans might be liars, but Alain was not.

Something in his look changed just then. "Wait, there is something. Grace, you mentioned that Malva was interested in studying Mega Evolution?"

Grace, who did not seem to share her two companions' lingering shock over Korrina's outburst, leaned forward. "Yes, that's what Dexio said. Why?"

"Malva's not a scientist. She was more of a personal bodyguard to Lysandre. She wouldn't be interested in studying Mega Evolution so much as using it."

Grace nodded. "Yes, Augustine said the same thing before."

"But Malva's got a brother, Laevus," Alain went on. "I never met many of the scientists when I was working for Lysandre, but I met Laevus personally when we got back from Hoenn with the monolith. He was the lead scientist on the team that was supposed to study it. Lysandre introduced us..."

Alain made a face, like he'd gotten a whiff of something rancid. Grace paled.

"And this Laevus, her brother, you think he's the person behind the kidnapping?"

"I think if anyone's got an interest in Mega Evolution, it's that guy. He asked me so many questions about Hoenn and the condition of the monolith, where we found it, that sort of thing. It was like he was hungry to know. That's a weird way to describe it, but that's what it seemed like. Since he's Malva's brother, I bet he's involved somehow."

"So Laevus is the brains and Malva's the brawn. He could have sent her to retrieve Serena," Sycamore said.

Gurkinn cleared his throat. "Alain, would you happen to know if Laevus is an Ignifer like his sister?"

"Huh? Why?"

"Please, humor me. Do you know?"

Alain shook his head. "No, he's a skuff. All the Tamers who work for Lysandre are field agents. The scientists are all plebs and skuffs. Why?"

"A skuff obsessed with Mega Stones... And now he's abducted a Magus..."

"Grandpa?" Korrina said. "What're you thinking?"

"Professor, you must forgive me. I know you've been studying Mega Evolution with good intentions, and yet I confess I have not been as forthcoming with you as I could have been. I was only doing what I

believed was right. Korrina, my dear, would you please retrieve the Mega Stone and bring it here?"

"Grandpa... Are you sure?" Korrina said.

"Yes. Go, please."

Korrina nodded and headed upstairs to do just that. She was gone just a few minutes, and by the time she got back to the living room with the Mega Stone in hand, everyone was seated again and not talking.

"Grandpa, here you go."

Korrina held out the stone for Gurkinn, and Sycamore hovered near her.

"Incredible," he said. "A true Mega Stone. You had one here this entire time?"

Gurkinn accepted the stone in his spindly hands and balanced it on his lap. "Yes. This Mega Stone has been in my family for generations."

The Mega Stone glowed an earthy chestnut and illuminated Gurkinn's Bellator Aura, as it had done for Korrina and Alain the other day. Lucario yipped and hopped up onto the couch next to Gurkinn, drawn by the Mega Stone. Blaziken also walked around the couch past Korrina to get a better look at the stone. Sycamore watched their behavior with rapt attention.

"Ah, I see! Only Pokémon capable of Mega Evolution are lured by the stone. Klefki and Aegislash don't seem to be affected at all," Sycamore said.

"What's that?" Calem asked, indicating the tornadoes of color swirling around Gurkinn's hands and feet.

"Aura," Alain answered. "Apparently, the Mega Stone can reveal a Tamer's Aura if he or she touches it."

"Yes, precisely. Every Tamer has a different Aura of a different color," Gurkinn said.

"You mean like heartstrings?" Calem said.

"Heartstrings?"

"Yeah. Serena, she sees heartstrings. She says they're all different

colors depending on the person."

Gurkinn smiled tiredly. "How interesting. The Magi have been extinct for many hundreds of years. To think of what young Serena must be capable of without even realizing it." He turned to Grace and nodded to her. "I sensed a great courage in you when we met. Now I see it's much more than that. It must have been very hard to trust Professor Sycamore to help your only daughter with such a precious secret."

Grace pressed her lips together and wrung her hands, but she held her head high. "I just want what's best for Serena."

"Yes, I can see that very clearly. Professor, I think you will be able to find Serena now."

"What? How?" Calem demanded.

"This Mega Stone... It only reacts to Tamers, just as only Tamers can access Mega Evolution. Grace, if you would be so kind?"

Gurkinn handed her the Mega Stone, and when she accepted it, it returned to its usual crystalline hue with all the colors of the spectrum swimming faintly inside it. Grace gasped.

"Fascinating," Sycamore said. "So plebs like Grace and myself are not affected by the Mega Stone."

"Precisely," Gurkinn said. "The same is true for skuffs, incidentally."

"Laevus," Alain said.

"Mm. And therein lies your answer."

"Oh my god," Alain said. "Of course, why didn't I see it before? It makes so much sense."

"What?" Calem said, exasperated.

"Laevus is a skuff who can't use Mega Evolution, and Malva already mastered it. Why would they have anything else to do with it? Unless —"

"Unless Laevus is trying to find out a way for non-Tamers to use it," Sycamore interrupted, his eyes shifty as his thoughts raced faster than his mind could process them. "He's trying to use Mega Evolution, and somehow Serena is a part of that."

"The Mega Stone can induce Mega Evolution," Korrina said. "That's the secret we've been guarding for generations. You're telling me some random skuff figured it out?"

Alain shook his head. "Why not? He had that huge monolith to work with."

"Ah, but the Mega Stone only works on a Pokémon, not on a person," Gurkinn said. "Even if you were to induce Mega Evolution, the bond necessary to sustain it would not be present. The Pokémon would be driven mad and no skuff could possibly control it."

"So, you're saying this Laevus person wants to find a way to make the stone work for himself, too?" Grace said. "How can he do that?"

"Serena," Sycamore said. "She's a Magus." He rubbed his mouth and began to pace. "No, that can't be it. It's not probable... But yes, that's... Ah, there's no other explanation!"

"Professor," Calem said. "You're not making any sense."

Sycamore stopped his pacing and clapped his hands together. "Serena wasn't always a Magus! That's why!"

"Is he always like this?" Korrina said.

"Yeah," Alain and Calem said at the same time.

Calem made a face and looked away.

"Oh Grace!" Sycamore got down on his knees and took Grace's hands in his. "Serena is most definitely alive and well. She has to be if Laevus is thinking what I'm thinking."

Grace snatched her hands away. "Augustine, get to the point."

"Laevus is trying to become a Mega Evolution master, right? But only Tamers can use Mega Evolution. QED, he needs to *become* a Tamer, just like Serena did as a child."

"Holy shit, is that even possible?" Korrina said.

"I have no idea!" Sycamore was beside himself at this point. "It's not a question I would have even thought to ask, which speaks to Laevus's brilliance. Bellators, Titans, and Adamantines like Korrina, Alain, and Calem here were born with their abilities. Only Magi, Mediums, and Reapers are made. They can make more of their kind, but they can

only turn plebs, not skuffs. Skuffs already have Tamer blood even if it hasn't fully manifested, so you see the problem. However, in theory, if Laevus could replicate whatever happened to Serena to make her a Magus, he could potentially gain her Tamer abilities and access Mega Evolution.

"Ah!" Sycamore put up a hand to stave off any questions, but none came and he rambled on. "But he'd want to do extensive trial and error with many test subjects. Yes, he'd need a very large but secluded space, somewhere a number of Mega Evolved Pokémon could be present, somewhere no one would look for him... Perhaps an undersea lab, or somewhere in the mountains. And he would be using Team Flare resources, no doubt. It's the most readily available and familiar source for someone like him."

"Wait, Team Flare has plenty of spaces like that in the White Mountains. Aside from Snowbelle City, there's no settlements that high up," Alain said. "I've been to a few of them. They used to use them for storage and offsite labs, but the lab in Lumiose is where the most important projects're kept."

"Hm. All the more reason to go off the grid on Team Flare's dime. Laevus wouldn't leave a unique paper trail, and who would think to look for him in plain sight at one of their bases?" Korrina said. "If it were me, that's what I'd do."

Calem got up, disturbing Klefki who had been hovering just over his shoulder. "Then that's it. Snowbelle City. That's where we'll start looking."

Grace still held the Mega Stone and was peering into it like a fortuneteller would a crystal ball. "These people took my daughter for some science experiment. I won't rest until they're behind bars."

"I'm coming with you," Alain announced. "I can help, and I know Malva. If she's really still alive, then we have a score to settle."

"Good, I would have expected you to," Sycamore said. "Perhaps Korrina has a point. We should leave the past in the past, at least for now while Serena needs our help."

"Well, if you're going, then count me in," Korrina said.

"What? Korrina, you're the Gym Leader," Alain protested. "You can't just leave."

"I can do whatever the hell I want, Titan. And besides, Grandpa's more than capable of watching the Gym."

"Korrina and Alain will be a great asset to you," Gurkinn addressed Grace. "They are both masters of Mega Evolution and very skilled in battle. There is no one I would trust more to carry out such an important task."

"They'll need a team," Sycamore said. "I don't know how many men Malva has at her disposal."

"I'm going," Calem said. "That's three Tamers."

"I know there's no discouraging you," Sycamore said. "But even so, you need to rest first. Properly, this time. Your arms won't recover by magic, even with that Full Restore."

"A four-man team would be best," Gurkinn said. "Not too many, but enough to pair off if necessary."

"I'm the fourth," Grace said.

"No way," Calem said. "Grace, you're a pleb with no battling experience. I promise I'll bring Serena back, so wait here."

"Absolutely not. Serena is *my* daughter, and I'll be there to get her if it's the last thing I do."

"Grace, I understand very well where you're coming from," Sycamore said. "But you and I would only get in their way. I'm sure Serena wouldn't want you to put yourself at unnecessary risk."

Grace stood up, and Fletchling nearly lost his balance on her shoulder. "I'm going, Augustine. And I won't be in the way. I'm the one who brought Dexio in. It was me who saved Calem's life after Malva attacked. You will *not* tell me what I can and cannot do when it comes to my daughter. I'm going, and that's final."

"...Well then, I guess that's settled. You need to get some sleep," Korrina said to Calem. "I'll show you to a room upstairs. All of you."

"We're leaving tomorrow," Calem said.

Korrina rolled her eyes. "We'll leave when your arms aren't about to fall off, dumbass. That's the last I wanna hear about it. You got that?"

Calem shot her a withering look, but Korrina ignored him. Grace

handed the Mega Stone back to Gurkinn.

"Do not worry," he said. "You will see your daughter again. I'm sure of it."

"I'll be sure when we find her," Grace said.

Korrina led Calem and Grace upstairs, but it took a promise to let Sycamore examine the Mega Stone in detail later to get him to follow. When they had all retreated to their separate rooms on the same floor Korrina and Alain lived on, Korrina let out a tired breath and sank to a squat against the wall. Lucario had followed her upstairs, and he kneeled down in front of her, curious.

"No wonder Alain ran away from his past," she muttered.

Lucario yipped and licked her cheek. Korrina laughed and scratched him behind the ears.

"A Magus, huh? I wonder if she knows what her mom's going through to get her back."

Must be nice.

Korrina resolved to make sure Serena knew it when they found her.

Malva hated this place. She hated the cold that seeped in through the zipper in her jacket, between the folds of her scarf, under her gloves no matter how many layers she wore. She hated the artificial light ubiquitous in a subterranean laboratory. She hated the seclusion, the lack of people and restaurants and bars and parks and other places where she would go to get lost in a crowd. Most of all, she hated the noise.

That pleb boy cried out in agony, and like a fucking knee jerk reaction, the Magus girl protested on his behalf, beseeching Laevus to let the boy go. Malva threw down her spoon and splashed canned soup on the table. She ripped off her pink sunglasses, useless in this underground shithole, and abruptly got up. Pyroar, who had been snoozing next to her chair, was instantly awake and stretched out with a yawn. Darumaka fell off Malva's lap, where he had been dozing, and rolled into the leg of the table, bumping his little head.

"Come on," Malva said to the two Pokémon.

Pyroar slinked after her as she marched to the lab proper, each step another spike in her blood pressure, and Darumaka rolled along behind Pyroar, careful to keep his distance from the lioness but unwilling to be left behind.

The lab itself was an enormous cavern the equivalent of about four stories tall with ramps overhead and access to the outside via tunnels. This room was subdivided into separate workstations meant for a full team of a hundred scientists and lab techs, but now only Laevus and the few Flare Agents Malva had brought with her occupied the space. In the vast emptiness, Serena's entreaties echoed as though there were multiples of her chained to the wall instead of just the one.

When Malva found Laevus, he was excitedly typing something into a laptop next to an examination table where Trevor was strapped to the surface on his stomach. His back was bare and prickled with gooseflesh, but most striking of all were the engorged veins crisscrossing his back. They were a deep violet, nearly black, as though filled with poison instead of blood, and they converged at a point between his shoulder blades. Serena was shackled to the wall not far away, her knees weak from standing and the IV that slowly siphoned her blood.

"Laevus, is it beyond your genius to keep a couple kids silent?" Malva groused.

"Sister, I'm so close I can taste it! Come and see!"

Darumaka rolled toward Laevus and tugged on his pant leg. Malva rolled her eyes and peered over his shoulder at the computer screen.

"Okay..." she said. All the numbers and medical monitors on the screen blurred together.

"He's responding to her blood, see that spike there? It's identical to the radiation wavelength coming from the Mega Stone shards."

"And I should care because...?"

Laevus was so excited that he completely brushed off her disinterest. Maybe he really was on to something.

"Because it's that exact type of radiation that induces Mega Evolution, obviously! It's within my grasp, just a little more. Ah, would you like to see? Of course you would. I'll show you."

Laevus was already waddling back to the table where Trevor lay, and he picked up a thin tube with a nozzle at the end. Trevor, only half conscious and glassy-eyed, noticed Laevus's movements and tried to struggle, but it was a futile attempt. Malva walked around the other side of the table. This close up, she finally noticed the thing embedded in his back. It was one of the seven Mega Stones Laevus had stolen from Lysandre's labs, each shaved off from the monolith Lysandre had retrieved from Hoenn. Only part of it was visible, and the skin around where it protruded was swollen and purple with bruising and infection, but the gem itself was crystal clear and swimming with veins of color.

"The Magus's blood works just as I suspected it would. Better, even. It's as if it breathes life into the Mega Stone, it's truly astounding. But it has to be fresh and hot. Watch closely."

Darumaka had climbed up Laevus's pants and parka to cling to his shoulder and watch, grunting softly. Laevus held the nozzle tube up over Trevor's back.

"Stop," Serena rasped, her voice tired from her vociferous protesting. "Leave Trevor alone!"

"Quiet!" Laevus snapped. "You'll speak when spoken to."

"Why not just gag her?" Malva suggested.

"Hm? Ah, good idea. But never mind the brat. Watch now."

He released the nozzle on the tube, and Serena hissed as the IV pump Laevus had hooked her up to pierced her vein and trickled a stream of fresh, hot blood through the tube. It came out the other end where Laevus held it over Trevor's back, and a thin stream of red trickled onto the Mega Stone. As soon as the blood splashed over it, it disappeared as though evaporated on contact. Malva narrowed her eyes, trying to believe what she was seeing. The stone began to glow pale pink as though transformed, and the veins in Trevor's back began to pulse.

Serena choked and struggled in her restraints as though a trivial blood draw amounted to a sword through her gut. She tossed her head, gritted her teeth, and hissed in pain. Trevor began to seize, and the veins in his back fattened to the point of bursting. The laptop measuring Trevor's vitals beeped excitedly, and Malva saw the spike Laevus had talked about. More than that, she felt the waves radiating from the Mega Stone embedded in the boy's body. It was the same

feeling as when she activated Mega Evolution the old fashioned way. But this...

It's drinking her blood, Malva realized as she stared in horror at the Mega Stone.

Serena's blood wasn't evaporating—it was being devoured. And the Mega Stone continued to take and take even as Trevor began to foam at the mouth and his seizing grew more violent. Darumaka grunted and jumped from Laevus's shoulder back to the ground, where he curled up in a tight ball. Pyroar snarled at nothing in particular.

"Stop it!" Serena wailed. "You're hurting him!"

"That's it!" Laevus said, practically giddy as he fed the stone more and more of Serena's blood and ignored her pleas.

Trevor's shaking became so violent that he slammed his head on the table and split open his temple. Blood smeared the table and dripped off the edge, but it was black instead of red. Something stirred in Malva, something instinctual and primal, and she snatched the tube from Laevus's hand, cutting off the blood flow from Serena. Immediately, the Mega Stone's pink aura began to diffuse, and the veins in Trevor's back receded somewhat. His shaking grew less erratic as he wound down from the attack.

Laevus blinked as he took a second to realize that Malva had interrupted the experiment, but he recovered quickly and jutted out his wormy lower lip in petulant defiance. "Malva! Give that back, how dare you interrupt the experiment! I wasn't finished!"

Malva threw the tube back at him and let out a sharp breath. "The kid was going to die. Then where would your experiment be?"

Laevus's jowls shook and spittle leaped from his mouth so violently that Malva wondered if he would become as rabid Trevor had been a moment ago. He slammed a hand on the table. "This is *my* study, and it's been very successful. Don't undermine me."

She shot him a venomous look and raised a hand toward him. Laevus lost some of his anger and leaned away from her touch, a touch he knew all too well could melt the skin off his bones. Malva let him wallow in that moment another couple seconds to let it sink in, but she backed off.

"Whatever. From here it looks like you're succeeding until you're not.

That kid couldn't take it. I doubt he'll survive another attempt."

Laevus had calmed down to a controlled simmer and was sweating profusely. His limp, brown hair was plastered to his head like a rubber swim cap in spite of the chill in the room. "Not that you would understand the nuances of my work, but no, he won't survive future attempts. But that doesn't change the discovery I've made."

"What the fuck does it matter if you can't achieve your end goal? Maybe it's impossible. Maybe a non-Tamer can't use Mega Evolution, and that's that. Just look at this poor kid."

Laevus waddled back around the table while Trevor groaned pathetically and tried to move. Malva eyed his injured head. The blood on his temple shone black in the light, and she wrinkled her nose at the stench, like rotten meat and wet metal rust.

"That's where you're wrong, dear Sister. This right here is proof. It's possible, I just have to find a way to sustain the reaction without causing death."

Malva didn't even bother looking at his laptop. "That's a big 'but', *dear* Brother. Besides, you'll need a new test subject. That pleb kid's wasted."

"I've had enough of your—"

Laevus cut himself off abruptly and stared into space. When it became apparent that he wasn't going to finish his sentence, Malva tapped his shoulder.

"You've had enough of my *what*, exactly?" she said.

"The pleb won't survive," Laevus muttered. "The *pleb*..." He turned back to Trevor and looked him over.

"Laevus?"

He snapped to attention as though he'd only just remembered she was there. "I have work to do. Get that kid cleaned up before he dies all over my operating table."

Laevus was so absorbed in whatever thoughts had clouded his mind that he didn't even notice Malva's boiling resentment. How dare he order her around? She was not his lackey, and he was not Lysandre. Those days were over, besides. If Laevus could make a real

breakthrough, she would never have to go back to Team Flare. They could start new lives, be other people, do other things. She could leave it all behind...but only if he succeeded. Only once she knew he would get the recognition he'd worked for so hard all his life.

Pyroar rubbed against her leg and jostled her from her thoughts. Malva ran her hand through her orange crest, smoking with embers that tingled her bare fingers but didn't burn her. Pyroar purred at the sensation and gently nudged her belly with her muzzle. Trevor groaned again, and Malva rolled her eyes.

"Oh, for fuck's sake."

She walked around the table and unlatched his leather bindings. His wrists were bruised and raw where they'd rubbed against the manacles and chafed. More repulsive was his back. It was like his body was in the process of swallowing the Mega Stone.

"Please," Serena called out, struggling to keep her head up. "Help him."

Malva froze, a grey woolen blanket in hand that she'd planned to wrap Trevor in. "Worry more about yourself, Magus."

"Serena." The metal shackles clanged as Serena worked to stand up straighter and hold up her head. "I'm a person, and I have a name: Serena. And you're Malva, right?"

Trevor coughed all of a sudden and clutched his face where he'd cut open the skin. Malva spared him a glance. She was no medic, but his temple looked bad enough to be broken. His eye was fast turning red from bloodshot.

"Please," Serena said again. "You said it yourself, Trevor won't survive another experiment. He's useless to you now. Please, just help him."

Malva walked around the table to face Serena, Pyroar at her heels. Darumaka rolled over the floor under the table and popped open at Serena's feet. Malva eyed the little monkey Pokémon, an earlier instinct to keep him away from Serena flaring up anew. She couldn't explain it, but something about Serena radiated a danger unlike any Malva had ever felt. Hers was not the aura of the violent killer or the brutal soldier, but something much subtler, insidious almost. It was in those blue eyes that remained bright and lucid even after the wear on her body from the constant chill, entrapment, and forced blood draws.

"I'd help him myself, but I'm stuck here," Serena went on. "Please, just

help—"

"What makes you think you're in any position to make demands of me?" Malva interrupted.

"Because you don't want this, either."

Malva frowned, but said nothing.

"I saw it, your disgust. When Laevus gave the Mega Stone my blood and hurt Trevor. You were disgusted."

What the fuck is this girl on?

"Is that supposed to move me? Let me stop you while you're ahead, hon. I'm not your friend or your savior. Empathy will get you nowhere with me or in the real world, for that matter."

"Understanding, then," Serena said.

Malva laughed. "Understanding? What does some kid like you understand about anything?"

"I know you love your brother."

Malva hesitated. It was not a particularly outlandish observation—a sister would love her brother, there was nothing odd about that. But the look in Serena's eyes, like she knew it was true without a doubt, like she'd seen it for herself, disturbed Malva more than she could say.

"That's why you're helping him, right? Because you love him. You feel obligated."

Malva closed the distance between them in three strides and gripped Serena's chin hard in her fingers, but she refrained from burning her. Her nails bit into the girl's cheeks and drew blood, but Serena didn't cry out.

"Keep talking," Malva dared her.

Serena returned her glare with what little strength she had. "You hate him, too. You wish you could leave him behind."

Something about Serena inflamed a poisonous fury in Malva, and not for any reason she could concretely pinpoint. Who the hell did this kid think she was?

"Why would you say that?" Malva said.

"I told you, I can see them. Your emotions."

Malva followed Serena's eyes as they drifted across her face and over her head, as though following the path of something flying about her head.

"Your heartstrings," Serena said.

Useless bullshit.

"How quaint."

Malva forcefully shoved her away, scratching her cheeks roughly and smearing a bit of blood over Serena's chin. Behind her, Trevor moved on the table as he tried to sit up, but his wounds pained him and he hissed in agony before slipping on his own blood and crashing down on the table again.

Malva whirled and caught him before he could tumble onto the floor. She nearly recoiled upon contact; his skin was ice cold, but his back where the Mega Stone was still embedded was burning up. Pyroar snarled, revealing her fangs and backing up from Trevor as though he were diseased.

This Mega Stone...

Trevor coughed again and crumpled over. Malva had gotten him sitting on the table with his legs dangling over the edge. He was so frail and shivering from the cold as he clutched his battered face.

"S-Serena," he rasped. "I...I'm okay."

"Trevor!" Serena gasped. "I'll get you out of here, I promise. Just hold on!"

Malva snorted. "What the hell do you think you can do? You can't even get yourself out of here."

Trevor wheezed as he clutched Malva's arm for support.

"So this is what you really are," Serena said. "You're a Tamer like me, but all you do is hurt people who're weaker than you. You're just a coward who learned how to fight."

"*It's okay to be weak sometimes. You're human, too, you know.*"

Malva tensed at the sudden memory, unbidden and unwelcome. *This girl...*

Trevor coughed again, and tears streamed down his face. Some of his blood got on Malva's white parka, and she swore.

"Goddamnit."

Manhandling Trevor to sit up straight, she walked around to stand behind him and eyed the Mega Stone in his back with thinly veiled repulsion.

I'm no coward.

Malva pulled up the sleeve of her parka and, with her bare hand, she grabbed the Mega Stone embedded in Trevor's back and yanked on it with all her strength. Trevor gasped and his body shook with lancing pain, but in one solid tug, the stone came free and left a bloody but shallow hole in Trevor's back. Instantly, the engorged purple veins in his back receded into his body, their color fading until it was hardly visible at all, like a diluted tattoo.

"Trevor!" Serena screamed.

Malva let him lean on his knees and stepped back. The Mega Stone she'd pulled out of him was no more than a shard that fit nicely in her palm. It glowed bright orange in her hand, and the Aura it emitted illuminated her body in glowing mist that rose off her like flames. Trevor looked back at her, wide-eyed as he followed the paths of the orange flames from her body.

Malva curled her upper lip and tossed the bloody Mega Stone onto Laevus's desk, where it soiled a few papers and notes he kept. She shook out her hand and wiped the excess blood off on the woolen blanket she'd set down earlier.

"Here, cover up."

She tossed the blanket to Trevor, who shakily picked it up and draped it around his shoulders.

"Th-Thank you," he said, bewildered.

His eyes drooped and he slumped back on the table. He would probably fall again if she left him there.

I have to do everything *around here.*

"Hey, you there!" Malva barked at one of the Flare Agents in the hall. "Get over here."

The Flare Agent jogged to the lab, dark eyes alert as he checked Malva, then Trevor, then Serena. "Ma'am?"

"Get that kid patched up. And throw him in some hot water before he dies of hypothermia, for fuck's sake. It's colder than a Piloswine's ball sack in this place."

The Flare Agent flinched at her language, but he nodded his understanding. "Of course. Leave it to me."

"Maru, Pyroar," Malva called to the two Pokémon as she turned to leave.

"Malva!" Serena called out. "Thank you."

Malva didn't even dignify her with a reply and marched out of the lab. Damn kids. She *hated* kids, for the record. Not any kid specifically, but the general idea of them. Underdeveloped people too weak and needy and fearful to survive on their own. These two had gone through some shit and were still holding on, but they would break, too, if they didn't get out of here soon. Everyone was weak in the end. All it took was to find out what made them weak and exploit that.

"*It's okay to be weak sometimes. You're human, too, you know."*

Malva bit her cheek as that infernal memory returned to her once again. She stormed into the shared bathroom to wash her bloody hand and caught her reflection in the faded mirror.

"*Such a pretty face, and there's fire in your blood. You'll be a strong one."*

Her father had been so proud when she was old enough for her face to promise a handsome woman one day. Beautiful *and* strong. What more could a parent ask for in a child? Her mother forced her to bathe in boiling water every night since she was five years old. It would keep her blood hot and quick, and her skin youthful and lively. She was Ignifera. She could handle the heat.

"*You'll be the greatest Tamer our family's ever produced,"* her father had promised her.

The pride and joy. The heir to the name. The greatest Ignifera Kalos had ever seen. Malva had been born to it, all of it, while her older brother, the firstborn son, may as well have not been born at all. Their parents certainly acted as though he hadn't been.

But Laevus had always been strong growing up. He was the one with the dreams, with the big picture, with the plan for both of them. And he had always been the big brother who reminded Malva that even she could be a child, that it was okay to be weak and needy and scared sometimes.

"*It's just one hour, they'll never know. Don't you wanna learn how to play kick the can? All kids know that game,"* he'd whispered on their walk to school one morning. *"One hour, right after school. You won't be late for training with Dad."*

One hour to do something so trivial as run around the playground with some other kids their age, all with the utterly stupid goal of kicking a can before the kid who was 'it' tagged you. Pointless, baseless, and the most fun Malva ever had growing up.

Until their father found out and gave Laevus a beating they wouldn't soon forget. Malva, just seven at the time, had been so afraid and unable to stop their father, even with her Litleo and Houndour around. Her father was an adult, a big man, an Ignifer in his own right. Laevus was just a skuff, a failed attempt. And when she'd cried, their father had called her weak. If she kept crying like that over some skuff, some defective unit that was the greatest disappointment to their family that had ever lived, she'd always be weak.

"*It's okay to be weak sometimes,"* Laevus had told her that night as he lay in bed, wrapped up in bandages with an eye swollen shut. *"You're human, too, you know."*

"Am I?" Malva said aloud.

She studied her reflection in the mirror as the memories flooded her consciousness. Her face was indeed beautiful. Her touch was deadly hot. Daddy's little soldier had become everything he'd hoped she would be.

Darumaka hopped up onto the sink and grabbed his toes with his hands as he looked up at her and grunted softly. Malva gave the little Pokémon a withering look.

"What, you have an opinion on the matter?"

Darumaka blinked up at her and smiled his derpy smile. Malva rolled her eyes and finished washing up. Her stomach growled softly. She'd never finished her soup, and her last full meal had been yesterday. The fact that the food here was shitty was the icing on the goddamned cake.

What she wouldn't have given for Siebold's cooking.

Malva rubbed her eyes, overcome with a wave of exhaustion just then, and scooped up Darumaka. "Soon," she said. "Really soon."

Perhaps he would know the answer better than her, being the best human she'd ever known. Surely he would know. Maybe he could even teach her.

Malva placed Darumaka on her shoulder and headed out the bathroom in search of something hot to eat.

8. Chapter 8

Wanderer
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

Calem spent a grand total of three days at the Shalour City Gym recovering from his severe burn wounds at Sycamore's insistence. The Full Restore had worked a miracle, he claimed. Just look at how the tissue was growing back! Sure, there were deep scars that would mark Calem for life, and there was the issue of his arm muscles, new and pink and as weak as a sickly old man's, but that could be fixed with time and training. Maybe. More likely, he would never recover his previous strength ever again, the strength that made him an Adamantine. Gone.

Calem could not hold Aegislash anymore. The golden shield was too heavy in his left hand. His fingers bent at odd angles where they'd healed as best they could after Malva shattered his hand with her boot. Aegislash's blade was light considering her size and power, but holding her upright by the hilt was like a newborn holding a two-by-four. He tested his stamina, and the best he could do by the end of the second day at the Gym was a pathetic fifty-seven seconds. If he tried to move the blade in a slashing attack, that time was cut in half.

The sandy beach behind the Tower of Mastery gave under his bare feet as he gritted his teeth and swung Aegislash through the pain. Her Cyclops eye swiveled and stared at him vacantly, but he could feel her phantom Aura pulsing in his clammy palm.

"One more," he said to them both.

The Ghost sword sliced the air, cleaving it in a purple haze that seemed to eat the atmosphere around it. With a thud, Calem's shaking arm gave out and the hilt slipped from his grip, but Aegislash floated on her own and hovered just in front of him. Her black feeler ribbons secured the shield in a defensive stance, and her lone eye gazed down at Calem as he panted in a sweat.

It was late afternoon, and the sea breeze and the tropical currents brought with them warmer weather, warm enough to work up a sweat in the sand. Calem waited as his breathing began to even out and wiped the sweat from his brow. His arms were shaking from the exertion, and he rolled up the loose linen sleeves covering them. Thick scar tissue covered his forearms like fissures, bubbled and raw. The

Full Restore had sealed the wounds, and underneath all that scar tissue, his regenerating muscles throbbed. Sycamore had not been sure how long it would take Calem to regain his former strength, if ever, only that it would take time. Time he didn't have while Serena was still lost somewhere in the White Mountains east of Snowbelle.

"Okay, again," Calem said, shaking out his arms. They still trembled and ached, but he'd caught his breath and took a swig from his water bottle.

Aegislash peered down at him, silent as ever, but she didn't reach for him with her feelers.

"Aegislash," Calem said, frowning. "I said, let's go again."

Violet miasma emanated from the golden sword and shield, as it always did, pulsing as though in time with a heartbeat. But she didn't budge. He glared up at his oldest Pokémon.

"I'm pretty sure she heard you the first time."

Korrina was with her Hawlucha, which shifted his weight in the sand beside her and came up to her waist in height. Wicked claws flexed atop the joints in his folded wings, reminiscent of some prehistoric Pokémon more than any bird Calem was familiar with.

"What do you want?" Calem said. "I came out here so I wouldn't disturb your Gym trainers."

Korrina snorted and approached. Hawlucha hopped alongside her, his beady eyes trained on Aegislash. "Chill out. No one here's out to get you, so relax. I was looking for you."

"Why?"

She wore training gear, and her bangs and shirt were damp from an earlier workout. "Alain asked me to."

Calem bristled. "Why would he do that?"

"He was worried about you pushing it too hard while you're still recovering. And he knew you wouldn't talk to him, so here I am."

"Well consider this talk over. And you can tell Alain to mind his own fucking business."

Korrina laughed. "That's funny, that's exactly what I told him."

Calem remained silent, unsure how to respond to that. Korrina took the opportunity to check out Aegislash from a respectable distance.

"When people say you're pushing yourself too hard, it's because they see you struggling in an unhealthy way," Korrina went on. "But if you really want to get better, you have to struggle. The trick is doing it in a way that doesn't do more harm than good."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Korrina glanced at Calem. Her green eyes lingered on his exposed arms, but he couldn't read her expression. "Hawlucha's my newest Pokémon. I caught him not even a year ago." She stroked Hawlucha's feathered crest, and Hawlucha ruffled his vibrant head and neck feathers appreciatively. "You shoulda seen me when I first tried training with him. It was a disaster. I'd never worked with a Flyer before, obviously. They're not as bad as Psychics, but they're so finicky.

"I couldn't spar with Hawlucha like I can with Lucario and the others. What kind of Fighter doesn't spar with his trainer? A month in, and I was on the verge of releasing Hawlucha."

Calem's arms itched and ached and all he wanted to do was be alone to deal with it.

"No disrespect, but why're you telling me this? It has nothing to do with me," he said.

"Because I'm a Gym Leader, which makes me better than you in pretty much every way, so maybe you can learn something. I have a point. Think you can bear with me a little longer, Princess?"

Calem glared at Korrina, but she glared right back. He averted his gaze.

"I didn't release Hawlucha, obviously. But I did watch the annual Kalos Sky Trainer Championships, which happened to be on during that first month after I caught Hawlucha. Grandpa insisted I watch it this year. You know, that event where they sky dive and do those free-falling obstacle courses? Anyway, not all the Sky Trainers are Caelifers, but the ones who are are the reason to watch. Have you seen a Caelifer work with a Flyer?"

Calem shook his head. "No."

"You should. It's like they learn how to fly with their Pokémon. Not literally, obviously, but more, I dunno, spiritually. Emotionally, whatever you prefer. With them, it's not so much about the target in front of you, but everything else: the air currents, the wind, the altitude. If you pay attention to that, you can see where your target's going before they move. Caelifers have 20/4 vision. They see the world just like their Flyers see it, under a microscope. Nothing gets past them. When I watched them in that Sky Trainer Championship, it was like watching another species. I mean, I guess that's what we all are, in a way. But after seeing them, I knew what I was doing wrong with Hawlucha."

"What?" Calem said, a little curious.

Korrina smirked. "I was ignoring his true nature. Fighting and Flying types are about as different as day and night. You can't treat one like the other, but Hawlucha's both. So I had to learn how to deal with both." She held out her arm, which was covered in a thick leather brace, and Hawlucha leaped into the air and curled his talons around the brace. His magnificent red and green wings spread, more like arms covered in feathers than true wings, and he let out a piercing battle squawk.

Calem jumped, startled at the Flyer's sudden transformation from a hobbling bird to a predator as formidable as any Blaziken or Lucario. Korrina shushed Hawlucha and him calmed down. He swiveled his head to the side and fixed Calem with a dark eye, permanently narrowed as though in silent threat.

"Not bad for a bird that looks like a piñata," Korrina said.

Calem eyed her perfect posture as she balanced Hawlucha's considerable weight on her arm and rolled down his sleeves self-consciously.

"Good for you," Calem said, unable to hide some of the bitterness in his tone. "I want to get some more done before it's dark, so if you don't mind..."

Korrina let Hawlucha leap from her arm, and he took to the sky riding the warm air currents. "Yeah, I mind. Did you not get what I was trying to tell you?"

He stared at her blankly, and she rolled her eyes.

"You know, for as much as you seem to dislike Alain, you have a lot

more in common with him than you realize. Come here."

She walked around Calem and reached for his arm, but he pulled away.

"What're you doing?"

"Look, Alain did ask me to come out here and drag your ass back inside because he's too afraid to make things worse between you two. That's not what I'm gonna do. You wanna train with Aegislash? Fine. But you're sure as shit not gonna help anyone if you undo all the healing that Full Restore did."

"Okay, I've tried to be civil here," Calem said. "But what I do is none of your business. I don't care if you're a Gym Leader. You're not like me. You don't know what I can do."

"I know what you *can't* do. Anyone watching you out here for five minutes can tell you can't fight with your sword. Hell, you can barely lift her for more than a minute."

Heat flushed Calem's cheeks. "Why do you think I'm practicing? It's the only way I'll get back to the way I was before this happened."

"You can't go back to the way you were before. And you won't help anyone by forcing your body to do something it can't do anymore, least of all Serena."

Calem gritted his teeth. Tears stung his eyes, but he blinked them away in his anger. "Shut up," he spat.

She stared back at him coldly and held up a finger for silence. "Stop. Don't say another word, or you'll regret it in ways you can't even imagine. Believe me."

Calem clenched his fists and showed her his back. He wanted to scream, to grab Aegislash and show her just how wrong she was. But the worst part was that he knew she was right. He couldn't go back, at least not without substantial time to recover and retrain his body after the damage Malva did.

Malva.

He squeezed his eyes shut in shame at the image of her face in his mind. He could hear her voice in his head even now, and the phantom burn in his arms when she overpowered him and brought him to his

knees. *Him*, a Steel Adamantine, of all the things. They were supposed to be unbreakable, unbendable. Poison couldn't touch them, an Atlas's might could not break them. Even the fabled Fairies the high and mighty Titans feared above all others could not stand up to their iron will. But Malva, one woman, had squashed him so easily, like he was gum under her shoe.

Serena had paid the price for his weakness, and all he could do now was continue to wither and wallow in pain.

A hand on his shoulder made him cringe, but Korrina's grip was firm. "Calem," she said softly. "The only thing you're doing wrong is that you're trying to make a broken thing work like new. You can't."

"Then what am I supposed to do?" he said, swallowing the knot in his throat. Aegislash hovered in front of him in her defensive stance, stoic and silent. "I have to make it right. I have to."

"You can. But you just have to accept that the way you've been doing things won't be enough anymore. You want to wield Aegislash again, right?"

"Yes."

"Then do it."

"That's what I've been trying to do."

"No, you've been trying to wield a Steel sword. But that thing?" She nodded at Aegislash and pressed her lips together in mild disdain. "She's a Ghost. Ghosts don't play like Steel types do. Maybe you should stop ignoring that part of Aegislash and start figuring out how you can use it to both your advantages."

Calem swallowed hard and looked up at Aegislash. Of course he knew she was a Ghost, a being from another plane that had possessed a corporeal object and infused it with spectral power. Ghosts often possessed material objects in order to survive on this plane, such as the Chandelure line that possessed candles and lanterns, or the Banette line that possessed unwanted children's toys. Some objects possessed latent power, imbued through the feelings of Pokémon or humans that had interacted with them in a meaningful way. Ghosts were drawn to that invisible power, be it in objects or hallowed ground or even in some people—the Mediums.

"You're saying... I should learn to fight with Aegislash like a Medium

would fight with a Ghost?"

Korrina shrugged. "I don't know. I don't know any Mediums. But I know that when I started treating Hawlucha like a Flyer, I started to see results. I think you can figure that out with Aegislash, too."

"You do?"

"It's the only way you'll be useful helping us get Serena back. So yeah, I think you'll be motivated like hell to figure it out."

They remained silent a moment as Calem considered her words. Korrina patted him on the shoulder one last time and broke away.

"Dinner's at eight. We eat on time here, so don't be late unless you want Grandpa's Machamp to come get you."

Calem stood there lost in thought, and when he snapped out of it, Korrina was already gone. He wiped his brow again. His arms were still trembling, but the ache had subsided a little. Above, Korrina's Hawlucha squawked and dived toward the sea, where he caught a fat Magikarp in his talons. Calem watched as he flew with the wriggling fish to a nest atop one of the larger palm trees and began to tear into the fish with his wing talons.

Aegislash floated beside Calem like a second shadow, and Calem reached out a shaking hand for her. Silently, Aegislash curled one of her black feeler ribbons around Calem's knuckles and wrist. He watched the faint violet haze that rose off Aegislash, hardly visible unless you looked closely. It tingled, cool on his skin.

"How do I treat you like a Ghost?" he said.

Aegislash's ribbon slowly wrapped around Calem's arm under the loose sleeve. The dead scar tissue was numb to her touch, the nerve endings in the skin almost nonexistent after being incinerated. But he closed his eyes and felt the cool sensation, like a snake's cold scales slithering over his mottled flesh. The wind was gentle, and he fell into a light trance as he willed his arms to still, willed the pain away.

A whisper in his ear jerked him out of his reverie, but there was no one around save for Aegislash. The sentient sword looked down at him with her single eye. It was jewel-like and seemed to hold an entire universe in its depths, black holes that sucked in anything in its field of vision. The whisper faded, and Calem wondered if he'd imagined it.

"Was that...?"

Aegislash removed her shield and changed her stance. More black feeler ribbons slithered around Calem's arms, connecting him to sword and shield as they usually did. Aside from their soothing coolness, he barely felt the weight of the ribbons on his mutilated arms. He concentrated on the cool mist they emanated, wondering why he hadn't noticed it much before. Was Aegislash doing it on purpose?

"Can you show me?" he said.

Aegislash hovered just out of reach where he couldn't reach her hilt or shield. When he tried to, she pulled away. Aegislash's lone eye swiveled and the ribbons tightened gently around Calem's arms.

"How am I supposed to fight with you if I can't even reach you?"

The sentient sword stubbornly remained out of his reach, and he frowned. Possessed or not, a sword was still a sword. It was only as good as its handler. As a Honedge, Aegislash had taught Calem how to swordfight, guiding his movements until he memorized where to jab, when to feint, the perfect moment to apply pressure and channel the sword's ghastly powers at just the right angle. Now, it was as if Aegislash was trying to guide his movements like he was a beginner again.

Maybe I am.

How does a Ghost fight?

He sighed and shook his head. "Okay. You want me to follow? Okay. Show me."

Aegislash pulled him along, and he let her lead, something he hadn't done in years since he'd perfected his technique. The sand kicked up under his feet, but the beach was otherwise quiet. Hawlucha had gorged himself on the fat Magikarp and let the scraps fall at the base of the palm tree to rot in the waning sunlight. Calem tripped over himself as he tried to learn a dance he already knew with new steps to a new tempo. Something guided his steps, the reach of his arm, whispered in his ear as he moved.

His arms stopped shaking, and he lost count of how long he kept it up after he counted to four-hundred thirty-two seconds. He didn't even notice the inky blackness of night over him until Grace came outside to collect him for dinner. Gurkinn's Machamp didn't make an

appearance.

Two hours had passed, and there was no pain at all.

Alain checked the straps on Charizard's saddle to make sure they were comfortably tight and wouldn't slip mid-flight. Charizard made a low humming sound in the back of his throat that could have passed for an Arcanine's whine. Alain grinned and patted Charizard on the neck.

"I know it's a bit of a pain, but I have to do something to protect Korrina's soft butt," he said conspiratorially.

"My butt is strong hard and more than capable of sitting an overgrown gecko, for your information," Korrina snapped.

She poked him in the side, and he grunted at the sudden tickling sensation. He tried to grab her, but she danced just out of reach.

"Then consider it for my benefit," Alain said. "I like your butt the way it is. Don't ever change it."

She rolled her eyes. "Idiot."

He reached for her again, and this time she let him catch her. She was dressed in a windbreaker and leather pants under armored flight chaps that hugged her curves. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he let a hand wander over the swell of her rear and pulled her close.

"So let me be an idiot sometimes," he said.

She pushed the edges of his violet jacket apart and ran her palms over his chest. "What'll you let me have in return?"

Alain's hand trailed under her jacket and up her lower back as he leaned in and rested his forehead against hers. "I thought that was obvious."

"Hm?" Her fingers found their way into his hair and she tugged him down for a kiss.

"You get to be an idiot the rest of the time."

She smiled against his lips and tightened her grip in his hair. "I could kick your ass, Titan."

"That would sound hot coming from literally anyone else."

She laughed and pulled away. "Don't complain just because it's true."

He yanked her back before she could get away and sealed the kiss she'd been teasing. They were outside on the beach by the porch not long after dawn, the same place where Alain had landed here last spring in search of something he didn't know he needed at the time. Aside from Charizard and Pangoro, the latter of whom was plopped in the sand chewing on bamboo, they were alone, and Alain was going to take advantage of every second of it. After today, they would not be alone any longer. They wouldn't have this place anymore. After today, it all had to mean something, and not for themselves, but for Serena, who needed them both.

Charizard huffed and scorched the sand with a puff of superheated breath. Alain broke the kiss and shot the pseudo-Dragon a look.

"I think he's jealous," Korrina quipped.

"I *know* he's jealous. It's in our nature."

Korrina grinned and went to stand with Charizard. He let her approach and run a hand over his long neck. "Don't be jealous, Charizard. You can have him."

"What was I saying about being an idiot?" Alain grumbled.

"Are you two ready to set out?" Gurkinn called from the porch. He joined them on the sand.

"Yup," Korrina said. "Everything's packed and ready to go. We're traveling light so we don't weigh down the Pokémon."

"Good, good." Gurkinn glanced back at the Gym briefly. "The others will be down shortly, but I wanted to have a moment with the two of you first. I am afraid this will be a trying journey for you both in ways you may not even expect."

Korrina took his hand in hers. "We'll be okay, Grandpa. We have each other and our Pokémon."

"I know, but there are some trials that no amount of training can ever prepare us for. And most often, we must face our worst demons alone." Gurkinn rubbed his mouth. His nails raked over the light stubble growing in. "Perhaps what I'm trying to say is be careful. Stay on your guard. You do have each other, so don't forget it."

He looked his age in that moment, a withered old man long past his prime who was just worried about his only granddaughter.

"We won't forget," Alain said. "And we'll get to the bottom of whatever Laevus and Malva are doing. Your family's protected the world from the dark side of Mega Evolution for this long. We won't let them undo all your hard work."

Gurkinn shook his head. "I fear we may be past that point already. Once Pandora's box is opened, there is no returning the evil to whence it came."

"Then we'll snuff it out," Korrina said. "Whatever these Team Flare guys cooked up, we'll put an end to it permanently. I won't let you down, Grandpa. I promise."

Gurkinn smiled tiredly and held Korrina's hand tenderly in his. "Just please come back safely. Both of you." He eyed Alain pointedly.

"I'm done running," Alain said.

The porch door slid open, and Grace emerged carrying a travel pack followed by Calem and Sycamore. Klefki was out of his Pokéball and hovering around Calem, but he yawned and betrayed his exhaustion. Alain eyed the odd Pokémon, unsure what to make of him. Something about Klefki unsettled him, tiny as he was.

Aegislash floated alongside Calem in her defensive stance. Next to the sword, Calem appeared almost frail. He wore a blue jacket that hid his ruined arms and a pair of flight goggles around his neck, identical to Alain's and Korrina's.

"Are you ready to go?" Grace said.

"Yeah, you?" Korrina said.

Calem said nothing as he tossed out Staraptor's Pokéball. The giant bird coalesced in a flash of white light and ruffled her feathers when she caught wind of Charizard and Pangoro. Grace followed his lead and released the Pidgeot Sycamore had lent her. He stood at his full height fully saddled, majestic in the morning light and leery of the other large Pokémon in the vicinity.

Sycamore said his goodbyes to the intrepid foursome setting off. "It'll take you about three or four days to get to Snowbelle from here, depending on how long your breaks are," he was saying. "But since it's

nearing the winter months, you'll want to fly in from the east. Loop around north of Anistar City and east a bit. That way, you'll avoid the storms in the White Mountains farther south."

Grace had a small map out and followed the path Sycamore had mentioned with a finger. "We should miss the mountains almost completely if we go around Anistar. How much longer will that take?"

"Long enough to keep us alive," Alain said. "Those mountains are terrible all year round. Whatever we can do to avoid flying through them, we should do."

Grace nodded brusquely. "Fine."

"When you arrive, please speak with Gym Leader Wulfric. He's an old friend, and I am sure he will help you find Serena and Team Flare's hidden base if you ask him," Gurkinn said. "He's a bit of a character, but he's a good man."

Korrina nodded. "Leave it to me."

"Are we leaving?" Calem said.

"Yes, let's," Grace said. "Here, for the road."

She handed Calem a granola bar from her pack, which he eyed skeptically.

"Take it. You hardly touched your breakfast."

He hesitated a moment, but relented and accepted the food. "Thanks."

"Okay, just one more thing before we get going." Alain drew his knife and slid it across his palm. He pressed it against Charizard's chest and exhaled deeply.

Korrina stepped back and held out an arm before Grace and Calem to keep them at a safe distance. Alain felt the familiar power surge of Mega Evolution as his blood fused with Charizard's, transforming him and reawakening his Dragonsblood. In a matter of moments, Charizard stood before him fully Mega Evolved. His glossy black scales, marred in places by old battle scars, shone in the morning light like polished jet. Blue fire licked at his lips between his fangs, superheated and teeming with draconian power.

"Oh my god," Grace said, covering her mouth.

Calem watched in silence with Aegislash and Klefki at his sides, simmering but carefully controlled. As soon as it was done, he turned away and mounted Staraptor. He tore open the wrapper on the granola bar Grace had given him and took a gratuitous bite.

"Magnificent," Sycamore said, awed as he walked around to inspect Mega Charizard without wandering too close. "A black Mega Charizard. He's truly a sight to behold. Ah! To think, he was such a little Charmander when you first came to Lumiose City. The potential of Pokémon is simply amazing!"

"I'd say take a picture, but I don't think we even have time for that much." Alain wrapped his bloody hand in a bandage he had on hand just for this purpose.

"Well, I won't keep you," Sycamore said, composing himself. "But Alain, I hope that when this is all over and done with, you'll consider returning to Lumiose. I know of at least one more person who would like to see you again."

Alain averted his gaze. "I don't know about that, Professor."

"Hey, help me up," Korrina said suddenly.

Alain was grateful for her distraction and made a mental note to thank her later. He helped her climb into the back of the large saddle to sit behind him, and she adjusted her goggles and checked that her pack was strapped on securely. Alain climbed up after her to sit in front. Mega Charizard was more than large enough to carry them both.

"Good luck to you," Gurkinn said to Grace as she climbed onto Pidgeot's back. "I have faith that you will find Serena and bring her home safely."

Grace blinked down at him. "Thank you. And thank you for all that you've done."

"Be safe," Sycamore said to Calem. "I know you aren't on the best of terms with Alain, but you have to be able to trust each other for this to work. We all want the same thing."

Calem swallowed the last bite of granola bar and handed Sycamore the rumpled wrapper. "All I care about is Serena. I'll do whatever it takes to find her."

Sycamore backed up to stand with Gurkinn on the porch. Korrina

recalled Pangoro for the journey and released Hawlucha.

"In case your lizard drops me," she whispered in Alain's ear.

He squeezed her hand wrapped around his waist.

Aegislash settled on Calem's back to fall dormant. Her black feeler ribbons remained wrapped around Calem's shoulders and upper arms like snakes. Klefki jingled and settled at the base of Staraptor's neck, determined to go along for the ride.

"All right, let's go." Alain patted Mega Charizard's neck, and he leaped into the air as though Alain and Korrina weighed nothing at all.

Hawlucha squawked and jumped up after them, his talon wings tearing through the air as though it were a solid mass. Pidgeot and Staraptor soon joined them, and Alain looked down at Sycamore and Gurkinn shrinking below them. Mega Charizard soared on the air currents, and Alain directed him due east. The birds, smaller but faster, zoomed ahead a bit, and Hawlucha soared after them. Aegislash's golden blade and shield twinkled in the morning light up ahead.

Alain looked back briefly and caught the brilliant shine of the Mega Stone secretly enshrined at the apex of the Tower of Mastery, the beacon that had led him hear all those months ago. It was falling away behind him, but its silvery glow did not wane as it caught the sunlight. Korrina squeezed him gently as she followed his line of sight. Taking a deep breath, Alain focused on the journey ahead and the endless miles of blue sky between them and their destination.

By the second night of hard flying, Alain and the others had made it as far as Laverre City. They camped in the moors east of the putrid swamps south of the city, foregoing the luxury of an inn for the expediency and convenience of camping. The moors were mostly flat grassland at the foot of the hills surrounding Laverre city like a fortress. They had stopped to make camp just before dusk, as they had the night before, and planned to set off again at first light.

Calem had not spoken much on the trip, living up to his Adamantine brethren's steely reputation for laconic brooding. Alain did not blame him considering the circumstances, but when he asked Korrina about how her talk with Calem went, she was unusually tight-lipped.

"Ask him yourself."

"I'm asking you."

She finished off her soup and disposed of the can in a trash bag set apart from the campfire they were huddled around. Laverre was much colder than Shalour, and Alain was glad he'd packed for winter.

"I'm not a X-Transceiver, Alain. If you want to talk to Calem, then go," she said.

"Hey, what's up? Why're you being like this? It was just a question."

She fixed him with a pointed stare like he'd just swallowed his own foot. "It's not my place to get in between you guys. That past you've been running from? Guess what, it's back. And you promised me you weren't running anymore."

He frowned and sat back on his mat.

"You know, in some ways, Calem's not so different from you," she said a little more gently. "It might actually do you both some good if you had an actual conversation."

"He's so angry," Alain said more to himself than to her. "At me, at Team Flare, at everything."

"He's angry at himself," Grace said all of a sudden from the other side of the campfire. "He watched his best friend be abducted by the woman who disabled him for life. I blamed him for what happened in the beginning. It was wrong and I came to my senses, but I'm not the only one who felt that way. So give him a break. He doesn't give himself one."

Alain and Korrina fell silent, and Grace continued to stare at the fire as she slowly ate. Her gaze was hard and implacable. Her Rhyhorn was resting just behind her with a blanket over his back for her to sit back against, but his beady black eyes were open and reflecting the firelight.

Alain got up. "I'm sorry, Grace. I shouldn't have said it like that."

He felt Korrina's eyes on his back as he turned away from the campfire and hugged his arms for warmth. Their voices were fading as he wandered into the moors, but he heard Korrina and Grace talking softly. He couldn't make out their words and decided it was for the better.

Charizard, Tyrantrum, and Heliolisk were out of their Pokéballs to hunt for food or rest until the morning. Without them, Alain felt naked under the light of the full moon overhead. It was so bright that it lit up a vast stretch of moor to the east. The cold was biting and he shoved his hands deeper in his pockets, but it would only get worse from here on out the farther east they went. Beyond the flatlands lay Dendemille Town at the base of the Frost Mountains.

Home, he thought bitterly.

He would fly right over it tomorrow on the way to Anistar City. Would they see him? Would they notice the black Mega Charizard right over their heads soaring like death on dark wings? One thing he knew for certain: they would not pursue him even if they did see. Cast off your clan, and you cast off your identity. Vanithers were nothing but zombies to the clan, walking the earth ostracized by the ones they abandoned and by the ones that saw only the monster in their midst.

Serena had never seen him like that, he thought as he walked. She had always found him fascinating. Alain had never known another Magus, and he hadn't been alive for the time when the Magi lived and flourished alongside the other Tamers. He had never witnessed a time when the Titans lived in fear of a force that could be their undoing. In the end, the Magi destroyed themselves before they could destroy anyone else. The irony left a bad taste in his mouth.

Alain was so lost in thought as he wandered that he almost ran into Calem and Aegislash. His only warning was the sharp swoosh of air as Aegislash cleaved it cleanly and Calem's feet crunched the frosty grass underfoot with each step. They were mere yards away, and Alain hadn't even heard them until he was practically on top of them.

He said nothing and watched their silent spar by the light of the moon. It was hard to make out all the details, but the demonic sword seemed to be moving on her own. She gave off a faintly violet glow that betrayed her sentience. Black ribbons wrapped around Calem's arms like fat pythons, each connected to the sword or the shield that floated just ahead of him like extensions of his reach. Alain stared, mesmerized. It took him a moment to realize Calem wasn't even touching Aegislash at all. They were connected only by the ribbon-like feelers, aglow with spectral light, and the Pokémon did the rest.

Except his feet. Except his movements. No, Aegislash was not doing the rest. In that moment, Alain had an uncanny sense of déjà vu. He'd seen this before. Not with Calem and Aegislash, but with Korrina and

her Lucario, and before that with Blaziken. The fluidity of near perfect sync, of silent understanding born of a marriage between instinct and trust. He had seen it before, and he never thought he would see it again from Calem of all people.

It was beautiful, he thought before he could help it. That perfect rhythm born of the deepest trust and respect was radiant beyond words. It was not Mega Evolution, but the feeling was similar. As soon as he had the thought, he felt ashamed. How could it be that the same depth of connection was impossible outside of Mega Evolution? What a preposterous thought. Calem was a Tamer just like Alain, and Aegislash was as formidable as any Charizard or Lucario or Blaziken.

Something jingled.

"Who's there?" Calem demanded.

Alain was so lost in thought that he didn't realize he was standing in plain sight for anyone to see. Klefki had seen him and alerted Calem, who had fallen still. His element of surprise blown, Alain put up his hands in a placating gesture and approached.

"It's just me. Sorry to interrupt."

Calem lowered his arms and Aegislash assumed her defensive stance, though Alain noticed how her feelers remained wrapped loosely around Calem's arms. Klefki floated just over Calem's shoulder looking as menacing as a floating keychain could look, but Alain eyed him warily. Something about Klefki just gave him a weird vibe.

"I was in the middle of something," Calem said coldly.

"I noticed." Alain hesitated and thought about how to approach Calem. "From what I could see, it looks like you're starting to figure out how to fight with Aegislash again. That's great."

Calem sniffled and wiped his nose. "Yeah, it is." After a moment he added, "Korrina gave me the idea."

So that's what happened.

Alain couldn't suppress a grin at the revelation.

"What's so funny?" Calem said.

"Huh? Oh, nothing. I was just thinking that's so like Korrina to make

you see things from a different perspective. And in my case, she beat it into me until I did."

Calem shifted, and Klefki swayed next to him. "She did?"

"Every damned day," Alain said with a chuckle. "Best thing that's ever happened to me. Anyway, I'm glad she could help you. I'm not surprised, really. She's... She knows what it's like to go through a terrible time and come out a hundred times better."

Silence befell them, and Alain shoved his hands so deep into his pockets he was sure he might pants himself if he kept it up.

"Well, sorry to interrupt. I guess I'll leave you to it." He turned to leave.

"Wait."

Alain froze and looked back, waiting.

"I know... I mean, we're all trying to help Serena," Calem went on, eyes glued to the ground. "So I guess... Er, what I mean is..." He clenched his fists and looked up. "Thanks. For helping."

"Of course I'd help. Serena was—*is* my friend. I'll do anything to help her."

"Then why did you leave?"

"Why did I leave?"

Calem advanced. "You heard me. If you were such a pal to her, then you'da known how hard she took you leaving. You didn't even say goodbye!"

"I—" He cut himself off. He hadn't been expecting this line of questioning. "She was upset?"

"Of course she was fucking upset!" Calem was shouting now and close enough to punch him in the face if he wanted to. "You were one of the only people she thought she could trust. One of the only people like us. She never had that growing up. This all just fell into her lap one day and she just had to deal with it. And you just left out of the blue when she trusted you to be there for her!"

"Calem, I..." Alain eyed Calem's fists warily. Weakened or not, a punch from a Steel Adamantine could break his face in two.

"No, you're gonna listen for once in your life. I don't want your excuses. She might've eaten them up if you bothered to give 'em, but you're dealing with me now. So tell me, Titan. What the hell was so important that you had to cast her off like last year's model?"

Alain swallowed hard. "I never meant it like that. I didn't leave to hurt her or anybody else. I left for me."

"Then you can tell her that when we find her. I'm sure she'd love to hear how you didn't even think about her when you decided to leave forever."

Calem turned on his heel to stalk off, but Alain yanked him back by the shoulder.

"Hey, don't you walk away from me," he said.

Calem shrugged him off harshly. "That's rich coming from you."

"Son of a nidding, enough of this! You want to know why I left? I'll tell you, so quit being a dick and let me explain."

Calem fumed in silence and crossed his arms. He nodded expectantly, and Alain had to resist the urge to roll his eyes.

"I'm not proud of what I've done. Not just that, but everything. My whole life... All I've ever done is leave people behind."

"How sad for you."

Alain shot him a dirty look but chose to keep his words. "I'm not gonna try to make you understand. But you asked, so I'll tell you. I left Sycamore's lab because it wasn't enough for me anymore. That probably sounds like a stupid reason to you, and it sounds stupid to me now, too. But back then, that's how I felt. I wasn't thinking about what I was leaving behind. I just thought about what was ahead waiting for me. And I found Team Flare. I found Mega Evolution.

"I'm not proud of how things turned out. At first, it was all like a dream come true. I had the chance to do my own research, be in the field, and learn about a new kind of power most people had never even heard of. I thought I was special. I could use Mega Evolution when most people couldn't. And then Lysandre sent me to Hoenn to get the monolith, that giant Mega Stone that's caused everything to go to shit now."

Alain laughed bitterly and ran a hand through his hair. "Steven Stone was right all along. I should've listened to him. Maybe the monolith would've been better off with Devon Corporation than with Lysandre."

Calem's expression fell and he lost a little of his bitter resentment. "Steven Stone?"

Alain nodded. "Anyway, Serena's not the only one I ended up hurting and leaving behind. There was this little girl, Mairin. She was just a kid who wanted a little attention. She was harmless and sweet, and she didn't deserve what happened to her. I fucked up, and now she's with Lysandre probably eating up all his bullshit, and I deserve that. I deserved to lose her, just like I probably deserved to lose Serena when I made that choice to leave like I did.

"But Mairin *didn't* deserve what happened to her. Neither did Serena. So I swear, Calem. I'll help you get her back. I'll make it right, and I won't leave her this time. I don't care if you hate me or you don't trust me. Trust Korrina. She's the best person I know, like in every single way. If you can't believe in me, then believe in her. You can take her word for it if you won't take mine."

The cold was seeping in through Alain's jacket, and he was beginning to miss the campfire and Korrina's presence. Well, he'd said his piece, and if Calem didn't want to accept it, then there was nothing else he could do about it. Alain turned to leave.

"Why is it so easy for you?" Calem said.

"Easy?"

Calem was staring down at his hands, and he sounded far away, like he was being ferried across an endless sea far from here. "How can you just get over what you did just like that? Doesn't it kill you? When you think about her, aren't you ashamed even a little?"

"Hey," Alain said.

"I don't get it. I don't get how you can just brush it all off, like it wasn't your fault. It *was* your fault."

"Calem, look at me."

Calem looked up and blinked hard to keep his tears at bay. "None of this would've happened if it wasn't for me!"

It took Calem a moment to realize his slip, and when he did, he stepped back on shaky legs and hugged his arms around his middle. Alain caught him by the shoulders.

"Hey. Hey! Look at me. It's not your fault. It's nobody's fault but Malva's what happened to Serena."

"You weren't there. You don't know what happened, but I do. And I have to live with it." Calem clenched his fists so hard he may have broken the skin. Klefki jingled about his head in worry. "I have to live with this."

"I did fight her," Alain said, tightening his grip on Calem's shoulders and shaking him lightly. "And I'll do it again when we find her. This time, I'll make sure I finish her for good."

Calem glared up at him. Alain was a couple inches taller, but he kept one eye on Calem's volatile fists out of instinct.

"She's not human," Calem said. "A person with a shred of heart wouldna done what she did."

"She also lost her Mega Pokémon. And she doesn't know we're coming. Between the four of us and Serena, she doesn't stand a chance." He nodded toward Aegislash. "Believe me, she won't know what hit her."

Calem let his hands fall as he tried to compose himself. He wiped his mouth, and Alain released him. "Professor Sycamore decided to give you the benefit of the doubt. I'm not such a jerk that I won't do the same. But this doesn't change anything else between us, Alain. And I want a favor."

"A favor? You just said this doesn't change anything between us."

"Not for me, for Serena. I want you to tell her to her face why you left and everything that happened to you after that. You owe her that much. She talks about you all the time, even after the way you left. So I want her to have the truth. And if she decides she wants to forgive you, then it's her decision. I won't get in the way."

Alain had the sudden urge to laugh but wisely held his tongue.

So that's what this is about.

"Of course I will, whatever she wants to know."

Calem eyed him like Alain might burst into flames if he was lying, but there was no spontaneous combustion and it was still cold as balls out here.

"Fine. Then I'll hold you to your word," Calem said finally.

"My word goes a long way these days, as it turns out." Alain held out a hand. "Truce?"

Calem hesitated a moment, but he shook Alain's hand. "More like a temporary ceasefire."

"That's good enough for me. I'm heading back. You should get some sleep. We have another long day of flying tomorrow."

Calem nodded absently. "Yeah, whatever."

Alain shoved his hands in his pockets and left it at that. He replayed their heated conversation in his head as he walked back to camp.

"You look like you just took the most satisfying crap of your life," Korrina said when he returned to the campfire. "I take it you talked to Calem?"

Alain laughed. "How long did it take you to come up with that?"

She shrugged. "You bring it out of me."

"Okay now *that's* a pun I don't even want to make a joke about."

She reached for his hand and pulled him down next to her. Grace was across the campfire in her sleeping bag with her back to them. Calem's was empty next to hers, and Korrina had curled up in her own bag while she waited up for Alain.

"He's training with Aegislash," Alain said once he'd shimmied into his own sleeping bag next to Korrina. "Whatever you told him looks like it got through to him. Thanks."

"I didn't do it for you." She poked the fire with a stick and shuffled the embers. "But I'm glad he listened to me. I figured he was enough like you that he'd try anything to get over his issues."

Alain frowned. "Gee, thanks."

"Settle down, Titan. I meant it as a compliment."

Alain was pensive as he watched the flickering flames. Korrina laid her head on his shoulder and he wrapped his arm around her amorphous form in the sleeping bag. "He's been through a lot. I think I got through to him a little, but I wish I could get him to... I dunno, trust me? Listen to me? I dunno how to talk to him. I can't blame him, but I can't help him if he doesn't let me."

"Maybe you already have." Korrina shifted and kissed his jaw. "You know, with you, I had to prove everything to get you to start paying attention. Calem's the same way. Show him you mean it, and he'll start paying attention."

"You know, if you weren't so scary in the ring, you could be a good teacher."

She elbowed him lightly in the ribs, and he laughed.

"He's in love with Serena," Alain said a little more softly.

"Obviously."

"You knew?"

Korrina rolled her eyes. "You *didn't*?"

"...I didn't think it was that obvious."

"For a guy with a reputation for lying, you're pretty gullible. Grace told me when you were off with Calem. When you put it into that perspective, I can see why he's been so hard on himself. Poor guy."

"Yeah." The fire danced and licked the night air as though it sought to escape in to the atmosphere. "But we have to direct that energy toward helping Serena. She's what matters now."

"Mm. Let's get some sleep."

Korrina pulled him down so they lay next to each other by the fire to share warmth. Alain watched the fire and let its warmth and light lull him to sleep. He thought about Malva and the recurring nightmare he had ever since their fight. He saw her face through the flames, just as he did in the dream. Her image danced in them, and they boiled her blood and filled her with heat and she smiled that razor blade smile like she had a secret. He forced his eyes closed, but he saw her there, too. Smiling as her Mega Houndoom drew his last breath.

Alain buried his face in Korrina's hair and held her close, willing the image away and wondering how the hell he would face the real thing when he couldn't even stand to face the dream that had haunted him all these months.

Grace was sore in places she didn't even know existed by the time the group finally landed on the edge of Snowbelle City in the White Mountains. The day was overcast and gloomy, but they had been spared a snowstorm by the grace of whatever gods may or may not have been looking out for them. Grace had found it hard to believe in any benevolent higher powers ever since one of them turned her only daughter into a Magus one day for no reason.

Snow packed the edges of the sidewalks where locally trained Mamoswine and Donphan had helped to plow it clear for pedestrians and Pokémon to travel freely. Grace had never been to Snowbelle, but it was supposed to be the best skiing outside of Sinnoh. Tourists flocked here to enjoy the spring skiing in the White Mountains, but never in the winter. Winters were tempestuous and angry, and travel through them was virtually forbidden due to the volatile climate. Now that winter's bane was lurking just around the corner, Snowbelle was quiet. Most people were inside in this cold, the flashy tourists nowhere to be seen.

The city itself had all the trappings of a high-end ski resort. Cafés popped up on every corner, and shops with the latest fashions out of Lumiose and Laverre glowed with bright window displays inviting weary passersby in from the cold to empty their wallets. A few fluffy Herdier and Arcanine pulled sleds full of locals hurriedly down the streets to wherever they wanted to go. There were no trams and trollies here like there were in Lumiose.

Grace tentatively patted Pidgeot's neck and thanked him for carrying her this far, then recalled him to his Pokéball. She would feed him later when they checked in to a room at the Pokémon Center. Calem recalled Staraptor, and they both watched as Alain deactivated Charizard's Mega Evolution. Grace had seen him do this a few times now, but every time the scene arrested her with fascination. Tamers were one thing, and she was still getting used to the idea of Pokémon as bodyguards and battle partners. But this Mega Evolution thing was so far beyond anything she had ever imagined she would get involved with. Serena was caught up in it, too, and for the umpteenth time, Grace wondered how her daughter was dealing with it all. And as they were wont to do, thoughts of Serena quickly morphed into thoughts of

Malva. They filled Grace with a now familiar bitterness, and she looked around for Calem.

He was with Aegislash and Klefki, as usual, and he had a blank look on his face as he watched a pack of four Herdier pull a sled with a family downtown. Grace went to him and put a hand on his arm lightly.

"It's different from Lumiose," she said.

"Yeah." He turned to face her. "Grace, I want you to promise me something."

"Oh?"

"This... It's not your area of expertise, what we're getting into. If it comes down to it, I want to know you'll get out safely, even if that means retreating on your own."

Korrina and Alain were out of earshot dealing with Charizard's saddle and unpacking it, but Grace lowered her voice anyway.

"We talked about this. I know I'm not like you, but Serena's my daughter. I have more of a right than any of you to retrieve her."

Calem fixed her with a stare that belied his youth. "I know. And she needs her mom more than anyone else. So you have to make it out alive before the rest of us, no matter what. For her."

Grace blinked at him. They were of a height despite their age difference. She digested his words, which took her a minute to fully comprehend. This mission was dangerous, she knew that, but to hear it out loud from a twenty-three-year-old boy who had become somehow dear to her in the last few weeks despite the severe heartache and violence she had experienced at the loss of Serena made it real on a visceral level. Grace was getting older, and like anyone approaching her mortality, she knew her time on this earth was limited. A young man Calem's age should never have entertained the idea of it, much less so calmly.

"Did you hear me?" he said.

After everything she had been through since Serena's abduction, at every corner when Calem's determination through his suffering had touched her heart, it was now that Grace felt the urge to cry at its most potent. She clenched her teeth.

"I heard you," she said.

Serena did need her. But hearing it from the mouth of someone so young who loved her daughter as much as she did broke her already broken heart in a way she did not know she had the capacity to feel. And worst of all, he was right. If she were in Serena's shoes, she would need her mother more than anything, more than any*one*, after all this was over.

And yet, Grace's gloved hand trembled on Calem's shoulder, and Aegislash's feeler ribbons quivered under her touch, as if sensing her despair and gorging on it. Calem held her gaze, unflappable.

"Calem," she said, barely above a whisper. "I—"

"So the Gym should be on the other side of town," Korrina said all of a sudden. "I've only been here once before, so my memory's a little rusty. Grace, do you have that map of Snowbelle Grandpa gave you? It should show the Gym's location."

"Oh, right." Grace hastily removed her hand from Calem's shoulder, the moment passed, and dug around her pack for the folded map. She handed it to Korrina when she found it.

"Looks like it's close by," Alain said, eyeing the map over Korrina's shoulder. "Small town."

"Let's just get out of the cold," Korrina said, folding up the map and handing it back to Grace.

Alain and Korrina led the way down the street deeper into town, while Calem and Grace followed. Grace felt Calem's silence acutely, but with Alain and Korrina in earshot, she dared not broach the subject of their previous conversation again. Snowbelle provided distraction enough, and Grace took in the unfamiliar but inviting sights like a rare breath of fresh air on their otherwise sullen journey here. Pretty lights adorned the stone buildings in every color imaginable in anticipation of the holidays. They twinkled like rainbow stars and cast a kaleidoscope of color on the snow. In another time, she may have enjoyed visiting this winter wonderland. Serena would have liked it, she was sure. Anywhere her daughter could be outside and experience the natural surroundings brought her joy. Thinking of Serena put a damper on the picturesque setting, and Grace hugged her arms to her chest.

They reached the Snowbelle City Gym after about fifteen minutes of

walking. It was a large building and nothing at all like Lumiose City's Prism Tower or Shalour's Tower of Mastery. This Gym looked more like a refurbished warehouse built more for utility than aesthetic functionality. More lights lined the edges of the roof and the windows and blinked festively. Grace wondered what kind of message the Gym Leader here was trying to send.

"Well, that's...different," Alain said.

"Apparently, Gym Leader Wulfric has a really corny sense of humor," Korrina said. "Grandpa said it's like listening to a lemon tell a joke."

"Lemons can't tell jokes," Calem said.

Korrina shoved him playfully. "And you can't take one."

"Whatever, let's just go in," Alain said. "Don't encourage her," he whispered to Calem.

They went inside, and immediately Grace was hit by a wave of...cold. It was freezing inside, perhaps even colder than outside. She shivered and clamped down her suddenly chattering teeth.

"What the hell?" Alain hissed. "It's cold as balls in here."

"It's not that cold," Korrina said.

"It's a little cold," Grace said.

"Whoa!"

Calem pushed her back roughly, and she nearly tripped.

"What's the matter?" she demanded.

"It's ice," he said, bewildered.

Grace looked up, and sure enough the walkway was riddled with patches of thin ice that glistened under the overhead lights. "What on earth...?"

Someone in a long white parka jogged toward the entrance. She had a Sneasel with her that sleekly skated over the ice alongside her. The crampons attached to her snow boots crunched and clanked on the tile and ice underfoot.

"Hello," she greeted. "Welcome to the Snowbelle City Gym. I'm Imelda,

a resident Gym trainer. Um, what can I help you with today?"

Imelda's Sneasel clicked his claws on the ice and glared at the group. Grace had the uncanny sensation that he was looking right at her, but it was Alain who took a step back away from the frigid weasel. Korrina moved in front of him boldly, ignoring Sneasel.

"Hi, Imelda. I'm Gym Leader Korrina of Shalour City. I need to speak with Gym Leader Wulfric. It's urgent."

Imelda gaped at Korrina. "Oh! Oh, well, that's... I wasn't trained on how to receive other Gym Leaders. Um..."

She fidgeted with her long brown hair and looked down at Sneasel. Her blue eyes flitted from Sneasel to Korrina to her mitten-covered hands.

"Just take us to Wulfric," Calem said. "Now, please."

"Oh, um... Well, I suppose that would be okay?" Imelda backed up. "I'll just let him know you're here. Please wait here. Come on, Sneasel."

Sneasel continued to glare daggers at Grace and the others, but he backed up and joined Imelda as she retreated to the Gym's interior beyond a closed door.

"Are you okay?" Grace said when she saw Alain standing a ways back from the rest of them.

"He's fine," Korrina said.

Alain waved her off. "I'm not so good around Ice-type Pokémon, to be honest."

Grace gave him an odd look. "...You have a Charizard that can do that Mega Evolution thing. Why would you be afraid of a Sneasel?"

Korrina grinned. "This is why I love plebs. They ask the important questions the rest of us take for granted."

"It *is* weird for you to be so on edge around a tame Sneasel," Calem said. "He's not even fully evolved."

Alain averted his gaze. "Bad memories from growing up. Let's just leave it at that."

He and Korrina shared a look, and Grace figured there must be more

to the story. But it was none of her business. She was here to get Gym Leader Wulfric's help in finding Serena in the White Mountains, and that was all that mattered.

Not long after, the doors opened again and Imelda and her Sneasel reappeared. "You can come in," she said. "Gym Leader Wulfric will see you. Just, um, watch your step for the ice."

"...Right. I've got a better idea." Korrina tossed out a Pokéball and released Blaziken. "Melt that ice, Blaziken."

Blaziken towered taller than Grace by nearly two feet, and she was quick to shove Calem back out of his path as he ruffled his feathers and began to shed cinders. With a swift jump, Blaziken unleashed a Blaze Kick that spread cinders all over the entrance and ate up the thin layer of ice like it was rice paper. Imelda gasped and stumbled backwards with Sneasel as she watched the flagrant disregard for personal property.

"My god," Grace breathed.

Alain squeezed Korrina's hand and whispered something Grace could not hear, then led the march into the Gym's interior. Calem was quick to follow, but he made sure to give Blaziken a healthy berth.

"Was that really necessary?" Grace said as she and Korrina followed the boys.

"It wasn't *un*necessary," Korrina said, grinning. "I want Wulfric to take me seriously. Blaziken's the best way to do that quickly so we can get back to looking for Serena. Besides, he's a Crystallos. They're known to be pretty frigid and unaccommodating. I want all the leverage I can get."

Grace nodded, but she swallowed the questions on the tip of her tongue. Perhaps she would never understand this subtle power play between Tamers, Gym Leaders no less, who were supposed to be allies. Whatever expedited the search for Serena.

Korrina and Grace joined Blaziken and followed the boys inside. Grace eyed the Fighter parrot with no small degree of trepidation. Alain's Mega Charizard seemed somehow tame compared to this creature. She couldn't explain it. Something about his yellow eyes and the way he looked ready to rip apart anything that stood in his way. Charizard didn't have that feel to him. Perhaps it was all in her head. Any of those Pokémon could have ripped her limb from limb in their sleep.

The Gym's interior was just as cold as the foyer, but it was far grander than its exterior architecture let on. Ice sculptures were carved out of the very walls, like the whole building itself was made of ice. The middle was frozen over with crisscrossing stone walkways in between the ice, reminiscent of an arena of some sort. Fire torches lit up the room from stone sconces and reflected orange flickers on the icy walls and floor. Imelda was up ahead with Alain and Calem, and she was leading them toward the arena where a burly, middle-aged man with a beer belly and snow white hair was standing with an Abomasnow opposite a young man with a Beartic. The older man wore dark snow pants and boots, a thin wife beater, and a heavy blue jacket that he hadn't even bothered to don properly, instead wearing it like a cape around his neck for no warmth at all. Grace stared in shock at his bare arms and wondered how he could possibly cope with the freezing temperatures in here.

"Sir," Imelda called out as she jogged toward him with her Sneasel. "The visitors, um, they're here."

The older man, presumably the Gym Leader, ceased his conversation with the younger Gym trainer and looked over at the group. He said something to the Gym trainer and headed toward the group with his Abomasnow in tow. Grace could not help but stare at the beast. He was like an overgrown white bear, though far larger and bulkier than the typically lean Beartic. Lichen covered his dinner plate sized paws and lower body, frozen and melded with his white fur like permafrost. Abomasnow's beak, owl-like, clicked menacingly beneath layers of snowy fur as he sized up the unfamiliar faces.

"Well, well, who do we have here?"

"Gym Leader Wulfric," Korrina said, stepping forward. Blaziken was at her side and hissed at Abomasnow.

The next few seconds that passed were tense as Grace wondered if she would witness a fight for absolutely no reason. Something about the atmosphere here screamed dick-measuring contest, and Korrina seemed more than happy to oblige.

"You can't be Gym Leader Wulfric, *I'm* Gym Leader Wulfric," Wulfric said. When he spoke, his trimmed white beard and mustache quivered.

Korrina's tough front warped in confusion. "Uh, yeah, I know that..."

"Well, is somebody going to tell me who I'm talking to? I don't mind

guessing games, but we do Trivia Night on Tuesdays, and today's Sunday," he went on.

"Are you kidding me?" Calem said more to himself than to anybody else.

"Oh no, it's a weekly event every Tuesday," Imelda chimed in with a smile. "We form teams and rotate every week for who comes up with questions and moderates. Even some locals are regular participants. Will you be staying in Snowbelle long? You have enough for a team between the four of you. Um, should I sign you up?"

"That's nice, but no," Alain said, cutting her off. "Gym Leader Wulfric —"

"That's a darn shame," Wulfric said. "It's all right, Imelda. We'll be fine with the usual lineup this week. Thanks for all your work on it."

Grace had had just about enough of whatever this was. She walked right up to Wulfric, who was a good head taller than her and twice as large around.

"My name is Grace Gabena. This is Korrina, Alain, and Calem. We're here because we need your help to find my daughter, Serena, who was kidnapped by members of Team Flare. We think she's here in the White Mountains at one of their secret bases, but we need your help to find it."

Wulfric turned his attention to Grace and sized her up. He had his meaty arms crossed, and his grey eyes were like two chips of dirty ice, hard and unforgiving. Grace held herself tall. This man would not intimidate her, and she would not leave until she had his full support.

"Well, now," Wulfric said. He had a deep baritone, rough around the edges but rich like a singer's with a smoking habit. "Ma'am, that is, Grace, may I call you Grace?" He held out his thick hand for her. "Let's start at the beginning. My name's Wulfric, it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. What's this about your daughter, now?"

"She's been kidnapped by Team Flare," Calem said.

Wulfric put up a hand and Abomasnow growled in warning at Calem. Klefki zoomed around Calem's back to hide near the dormant Aegislash.

"Now now, young man, I'm having a conversation with Grace here,"

Wulfric said. "It's rude to interrupt a lady when she's having a conversation. Wait your turn."

Korrina looked like she was about to pop a blood vessel. Grace swallowed hard and offered her hand to Wulfric, who took it and kissed the knuckles politely. She noted the warmth of his hands despite his inappropriate dress for the weather.

"Yes, my daughter," Grace went on. "She's been taken by an Ignifera woman who works for Team Flare."

Wulfric froze. "Ignifera, you say?" The room's temperature seemed to plummet all of a sudden as he narrowed his eyes.

"Gym Leader Wulfric," Korrina said again. This time, she got his attention. "I'm Korrina, the Shalour City Gym Leader. You know my grandfather, Gurkinn. He told me you would be able to help us navigate the White Mountains and find Team Flare's hidden base."

Wulfric lurched, like every movement he made was slow and protracted, and fixed his gaze on Korrina. "Korrina? Wait a minute, I know you. You're Gurkinn's granddaughter!"

"She literally just said that," Calem grumbled.

"Why, the last time I saw you, you were a little darling. You liked sliding around on the ice here. Hah! I remember you begged Gurkinn to freeze the Shalour Gym's floors so you could slide around there, too. Boy, we had a laugh at that."

Korrina remained stony-faced. "It's been a long time. I'm glad you remember me, but I'm not interested in sliding around right now."

"Let me get this straight, now," Wulfric said, looking around at the four of them. He took a moment to study their faces. "Grace here's looking for her missing daughter, who's somewhere in these White Mountains, and she's got a Bellatrix and, uh, you two," he gestured vaguely at Calem and Alain, "to help her. That about right?"

"We're not 'you two'," Calem spoke up. "We're Tamers, too, for your information."

"Oh, well congratulations on being born," Wulfric said dismissively before returning his attention to Grace. "Listen, I'm sorry to hear about your daughter, I truly am. It's a terrible thing to lose a child," Wulfric went on. "But whatever old man Gurkinn told you, I can't help you. No

one goes into the White Mountains this time of year. It's damn near suicide."

"Hey, wait a minute," Korrina said, advancing.

Calem beat her to it. He drew Aegislash by the ribbons in a flash, and Klefki too looked ready to fight as he jingled angrily next to Aegislash's blade, unafraid. The blade was inches from Wulfric's ample belly, and Abomasnow roared and beat his fists.

"Wrong answer," Calem said. "You're gonna help us find Serena no matter what it takes."

Wulfric looked between Aegislash and Calem and barely reacted, like it was totally normal to face off against a sword as big as a person and not fear for your life. "Is that so? And who's gonna make me? You?"

Calem cracked his knuckles as he made a fist, brandishing Aegislash. "Like I said, no matter what it takes."

"Calem," Korrina hissed.

Wulfric chuckled to himself like he'd just heard a raunchy joke. "Let me guess. Steel Adamantine, right? Ice types don't much like you iron heads, but I'm guessing you already knew that when you decided to come at me with that big steak knife o' yours." He gestured to Abomasnow. "Let me ask you something, boy. Are you willing to bet Abomasnow can't snap your little sword in two? I'm not a gambling man myself, but I'll take that bet any day."

Something about the way he said it chilled Grace to the bone. She would have never dreamed of comparing Aegislash to a dinner utensil. Just the sword's mere presence unsettled her. But Wulfric seemed ready, even eager for Calem to call his bluff. A spike of fear struck Grace like lightning. There was no way this man, a Gym Leader in his own right, was bluffing.

"I don't care about any of that. If you're as strong as you claim you are, then you should use your strength to help someone in trouble. That's why you're a Gym Leader, right? Because you stand up for the people in this city?"

"You're not from my city."

Alain put a hand on Calem's shoulder. "Calem, that's enough. We won't convince him like this."

Calem shrugged him roughly off. "I'm just getting started."

"So am I." To Wulfric he said, "We're not from Snowbelle, and you're not under any obligation to help anyone outside your jurisdiction. That's fair enough. But the White Mountains are all your territory, and that's where Serena's being kept. If you don't help us, you're condemning an innocent girl to a fate worse than death on *your* watch. Here's a Tuesday Trivia question for you: What will Snowbelle's mayoral council will think when they find out Team Flare's running a secret base for illegal experimentation and kidnapping in their backyard?"

"I'm thinking public outcry," Korrina said, not missing a beat. "Unlawful seizure of government property aside, I'd say we're looking at a metric shit ton of malfeasance. I'm no Snowbellian, but in Shalour that usually means the Gym Leader takes the fall."

"Hey Korrina," Alain said. "Isn't that actually a Pokémon League rule or something that all Gym Leaders have to follow?"

"I'm glad you brought that up, Alain. It's not just the mayoral council that expects a Gym Leader to use whatever means necessary and reasonable to ensure the safety of his territory, it's actually the Pokémon League's major stipulation in exchange for official recognition and funding."

"Wow, that sounds like it's a big deal," Imelda said.

Korrina glared at her. "Why yes, Imelda. It's a big fucking deal."

Imelda blushed and stared at her feet.

Wulfric had remained eerily silent as Alain and Korrina put on their little show, but Grace had not taken her eyes from him once. The way he was looking at Korrina and Alain had her fearing for their safety.

"Now that's just poor manners," Wulfric said. "I've been on the asshole end of plenty of hotshots coming in here looking to bury me in gold plated bullshit. I give 'em their fair shot and send 'em on their way. I like young people, you're full of spunk and sometimes you even got a good head on your shoulders when it's not shoved halfway up your own ass. It's cute.

"But let me tell you three something. The Pokémon League also doesn't take kindly to infighting and coercion between Gym Leaders. You just threatened me with legal sanctions if I don't do what you ask.

I'm no fancy lawyer or scholar or what have you, but here in Snowbell we got a nice word for that: extortion. Now, my little brother doesn't much like extortion. Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot you're not from around here. I say my little brother, but most folks here know I mean Mayor Remus."

Grace could feel the last of her hope slipping away as Wulfric faced off against Korrina, Calem, and Alain. No matter what they said or did, he would not budge. And if he didn't budge, she would lose her last hope of finding Serena. The urge to cry was so overwhelming that she almost gave into it. She hadn't done much of that since Serena's abduction, too focused on how to get Serena back to mourn her absence.

"I'll be willing to overlook this little visit out of respect for old man Gurkinn," Wulfric continued. "Korrina, I hope you remember this when you get back to your own Gym. You're still green, so you have a lot to learn. That's all right. But between us, I don't give second chances. Consider this your one and only. Oh, and I'm sorry to say the invitation to join us for Trivia Night is off the table. I don't have much of a taste for dramatics. Have a safe trip back to Shalour City." He showed them his back and headed back toward the icy arena with Abomasnow.

"Shit," Alain said. "What are we supposed to do?"

"He can't do this," Korrina said. "He has a responsibility to resolve any conflict in his jurisdiction. Extortion? Please, this is anything but."

"Well, he doesn't seem to see it that way."

"You're the Gym Leader here," Calem said. "Fix this. Isn't that your job?"

"It's his job, too," Korrina said.

"Um, I'm sorry your visit was so short," Imelda said. "I'll be happy to escort you out?"

Grace only half listened to their voices fading behind her. Her feet were carrying her after Wulfric without her even realizing it, and she caught up to him in a few strides.

"Wait!" she said.

Wulfric turned and sized her up, but his previous decorum was gone.

"Was there something else? I can't help you with your daughter, so if there's nothing else, then I'll have to ask you to leave."

Grace balled her fists and held her head high. Her only thought was of Serena's limp body as Malva slung it over the back of her Charizard like a sack of potatoes. "Are you saying you can't help me find my daughter, or you won't?"

Wulfric sighed and showed her his palms. "Listen. I really am sorry about your daughter, but—"

"You're Crystallos, right?" Grace interrupted. "That means you're a Tamer. So you have these special powers that I don't have."

Wulfric frowned. "Well, that's true."

The others followed Grace when they heard her talking with Wulfric and drew up behind her. She tried to ignore them and focus on the only thing that mattered: getting Serena back.

"My daughter wasn't born a Tamer, but she became one," Grace said, willing her voice not to shake. "I hated it. I wished we could go back to the way things were, but we couldn't. And you know what? Eventually she told me she didn't want to go back. That she didn't regret it because now she could make a difference. I raced Rhyhorn for entertainment and I wanted her to follow in my footsteps, but she told me no, that wasn't good enough for her. *I* wasn't good enough for her." Grace paused to wipe her eyes where a few stray tears escaped.

"She told me she wanted to help people. She didn't want to race, she wanted to *help*. She asked me once, what's the point of being a Tamer and having all these abilities if you don't use them to help the people who don't? I had never thought about it like that because I never wanted to think about it like that. You people with your abilities and your gifts, we had nothing to do with you until this was done to her. She showed up one day, and she wasn't just my little girl anymore. She was one of you, too. And I think—I *know* a part of me hated her for that."

Wulfric said nothing as he listened respectfully. His grey gaze made Grace nervous, but if this was her last chance at finding Serena, then she would gladly fall on her own sword.

"But all this time, I was the one who wasn't good enough for Serena, not the other way around. I failed her as a mother. She became a Tamer, and I wasn't there for her like I should have been. I can't go

back and change that, but I can do what I know she would do if our situations were reversed.

"These three," she indicated Korrina and the others, "have helped me get this far because they can. They can do things I could never even dream of doing. They don't have to help me, but they are anyway. And I know what Serena meant now. I was wrong, I was so wrong, and I want to tell her that when I see her again. I want to hold her in my arms and tell her I'm sorry, that I love her so much no matter what she does or who she chooses to be.

"I'm not going to threaten you or use your position against you. I couldn't if I wanted to. I'm just a pleb, I'm nobody worth mentioning. I'm a mother who wants to find her missing daughter, and I think you might be able to help me do that. You can help me. Not them," she indicated Korrina and the others, "*me*. I'm the one asking here. Serena's mydaughter, and I'm responsible for everything that happens to her. So please, with all your powers and position, if there's even a small chance that you can make a difference, will please you help me? Will you help my daughter?"

Wulfric sighed heavily and let his arms fall to his sides. "I've been Gym Leader here for thirty-some years. Not once in my tenure has anybody, Tamer or pleb, made me feel like the asshole in the room the way you just did. And you know something, Grace? I'm glad you did."

He looked over her shoulder at Alain, Korrina, and Calem standing together. "Gym Leader Korrina, old man Gurkinn's told me heaps about you, how proud he is of you. But he always says you have more to learn, and he's right. Being a Gym Leader isn't about being the toughest." He glanced at Calem. "It's not about being the smartest guy in the room." He shifted his gaze to Alain, then to Korrina again. "It's about remembering who you answer to, and that they're people, same as you."

He nodded to Grace. "I wasn't kidding around about the White Mountains this time of year being a death trap. I grew up in these parts. There's ice in my blood. But even I steer clear of the mountains this time of year. I respect them. But...I'll help you find your daughter, Grace. If she's somewhere in the White Mountains, then I'm the best one suited to go in after her. I can't promise anything, but I can help you, so I ought to. You're right about that. But I want something in return."

Grace could have cried. "Name it."

"I want to meet Serena when this is all over. From what you said, she sounds like she's got a good head on her shoulders. I like that in young people. You can always learn something from a young person with a good head on her shoulders."

Grace's vision blurred, and she blinked rapidly to dispel the tears. "Of course. I'm sure she'd like that very much."

Wulfric held out his hand. "Then we got ourselves a deal."

Grace shook his hand, which practically swallowed her smaller one.

He pulled her closer and said a little softer, "By the way, I'll be happy to reinstate that invitation for Trivia Night when this is all over."

Despite herself, Grace laughed a little. "I've never played trivia."

Wulfric smiled, and the iciness of his grey eyes seemed to melt as his weathered face lit up a little. "You'll love it. Serena will, too. There's not a soul on this great earth who doesn't enjoy a good game of trivia."

"So we're doing this?" Calem said. "We're going to find Serena?"

Grace sniffled and wiped a few stray tears from her face. "Yes. We're going to bring her home."

Deep in the White Mountains, Laevus was hunched over a stainless steel operating table under a fluorescent lamp. His left arm was bare, the sleeve rolled up over his paunchy elbow, and he held a sterile cloth in his hand, which he used to dab at the blood seeping from the wound on his forearm. A shard of Mega Stone was embedded in the flesh, and he'd sewn the wound back up around its edges so only a sliver of it remained visible. He'd had drugs on hand to numb the pain, but oddly enough, once the stone nestled into his flesh, the pain had dulled to a negligible thrum.

It was late, and the Team Flare assistants Malva had brought with her from Lumiose City were all asleep, Malva included. Laevus was alone in his lab with only the one lamp on to offer him light. Something shuffled nearby, and he looked up but didn't go to investigate. He knew the source of the sound.

"Now for the last touch," he said as he reached for the syringe he'd prepared.

Serena's blood had been direct from the vein when he'd tested the Mega Stone on the pleb specimen, but the girl was passed out and anemic from all the blood Laevus had siphoned from her for his experiments. If this stale sample didn't work as he intended it to, he would just hook her up to an IV feed in the morning. But he didn't want to put off an initial experiment until the morning now that he'd come this far.

Laevus produced a small black recording device from his sweatshirt pocket and held down the record button. "I've successfully embedded the Mega Stone shard in my left forearm, and I am now prepared to infuse it with Magus blood. I expect a positive reaction with my latent Ignifer blood. I should not have the negative reaction the pleb specimen had. This is Attempt Number One. Standby for results."

He locked in the recording button and set down the device. Then, he picked up the syringe with Serena's blood and stuck it in a vein at his elbow just above the Mega Stone. The pinprick made him wince, but he gritted his teeth and slowly injected the entire syringe. Then, he waited.

"I've injected the Magus blood into my bloodstream. It's been...seventy-four seconds and counting. No reaction so far."

He waited another thirty seconds, but the Mega Stone shard did not change its color like it had when Laevus had experimented on the pleb boy. Swearing, he got up and went to the shelf nearby to retrieve another syringe with Serena's blood in it. Not even bothering to disinfect the injection point again, he popped off the cap on the syringe and sat back down to give himself another hit.

"I am injecting another dose of the Magus blood. Standby for any change."

The recording device's timer counted the seconds as he waited. Twenty-three seconds passed and there was no change. He felt nothing. The tender skin around the embedded Mega Stone shard in his forearm did not turn black the way it had in the pleb boy. Something bumped Laevus's ankle, and he looked down irritably.

"What?" he snapped.

Darumaka grabbed his toes and grunted meekly as he peered up at him from the floor. Laevus sighed, regretting his tone, and reached out a hand to scoop up the little fire monkey.

"It's okay, Maru. Come on up."

Darumaka squealed when he got close and suddenly balled up and rolled away in a hurry. He hid behind Laevus's desk out of reach and poked his little snout around the edge to see if Laevus would pursue him.

"What the hell's wrong with you, Maru?" Laevus got up. "Come on out here—"

He reached out his left hand for the little Pokémon and froze when he got a look at himself. The Mega Stone shard in his arm was glowing a soft orange. He blinked, stared a couple seconds, and watched as it changed to a lighter pink, then an earthier brown. Laevus's mind reeled, and he snatched the recorder from the desk, Darumaka forgotten.

"This is Attempt Number Two. I'm seeing a reaction. The shard is showing multiple discolorations." He paused as he caught a flash of angry red, then the shard faded to a deep, ugly violet. "This didn't happen with the pleb specimen. His Mega Stone shard only glowed pink when it was fed the Magus blood..."

Laevus took a moment to flex his left hand and take stock of his body. His breathing was normal, and his heartbeat was a little fast, but it was always like that at this altitude. He was sweating, but his skin was clammy with chill. Uncomfortable, but normal compared to his usual state in this godforsaken shithole. He smiled, unable to contain himself, and lifted the recording device to his lips.

"I'm not exhibiting any adverse symptoms. My hypothesis may be correct." The stone in his arm began to swirl with a bright sky blue light. "Only a skuff with Tamer's blood can accept the Mega Stone favorably. Now, to test it."

He waddled toward the far wall where the shuffling sound he'd heard earlier was coming from. The overhead lights flickered on when they sensed his movement and illuminated a row of cast iron cages, each fifteen feet tall and jammed together along the length of the wall. They had been empty when he first arrived here, but over the past months, they began to fill up. He approached one of the cages now and stood in front of the bars.

A pair of compound black eyes caught the light and flickered like a hundred little mirrors. They reflected Laevus's figure staring down at them, the glow of his Mega Stone shard, and the bars in between

them. The creature, a Pinsir Malva had brought him just a few weeks ago, hissed and scraped at the rocky floor of the cage. The jagged, spiked pincers growing out of his head were each as long as Leavus's forearm and capable of piercing through solid rock. But not iron.

Laevus tentatively reached for the bars, and the captive Pinser hissed maniacally. He lunged at the bars and latched onto them, thrusting with his horns for a chance to gut him. Laevus gasped and stumbled backwards, clutching his left arm. But the bars stopped Pinsir. He was safe.

Swallowing hard, Laevus lifted the recorder to his lips again. "I'll test the Mega Stone's power now. Test Subject B47-R, Pinsir. Here I go."

Pinsir glared at him through the bars, and Laevus could feel his fury and fear. He had been brought here against his will and stuffed in a cage for a science experiment. But that was all he was: an experiment. A lab rat, or Bug, that existed solely to advance Laevus's grand design. Tonight, he would either succeed or fail. And then, he would try again with Subject B47-S in the next cage over. He smiled nervously and wiped the sweat from his brow, wondering if this experiment would end in success or failure.

Laevus took a steadying breath and reached out with his left hand. The glittering Mega Stone shard embedded in his arm flashed with light and settled on a faint sky blue. The closer he got to Pinsir, the stronger the blue glow became.

"Recording my thoughts as I advance. I feel as though the stone is pulling me, compelling me. Like it wants me to continue. I will continue."

Pinsir pulled back from the bars but continued to spit at Laevus. The clicking sound made his skin crawl, but he persevered. His fingers brushed the bars, and he reached into the cage. Pinsir shrieked all of a sudden and lunged at him again. Laevus gasped and tried to pull away, but his arm nearly popped out of its socket as his hand continued to reach as though of its own accord. The sky blue light enveloped his arm, shining under his skin as though it was spreading, and something cold and sharp dug into his wrist. With a yelp, he stumbled to his knees. Pinsir had sunk his teeth into him in defense. He dropped the recorder and it slid over the stone floor a couple feet away.

The light flashed bright, and Pinsir shrieked again. And suddenly, the

pain was gone. Panting, Laevus leaned against the bars, his right palm slick with sweat as he tried to hold on for leverage. Bleary-eyed and pumped full of enough adrenaline to make him fly, he blinked rapidly through the gloom.

"Oh..." he gasped.

Something rattled, like a shutter in the wind, and steadily rose toward the top of the cage. Laevus stared up, wide-eyed and mouth agape. His breathing was heavy, and his tongue was fat in his mouth, making it hard to swallow.

"Ha," he panted. "Ha, ha... Haha!"

The laugh rumbled in the pit of his swollen belly and bubbled up like an eruption. The Mega Stone shard continued to glow a steady light blue in his arm, no longer changing, and he stared up at the ceiling at the hundred-mirror eyes that stared back at him far above. He laughed and laughed.

The recording device lay a few feet away, recording the sounds of great wings buzzing and filling the room over his laughter.

9. Chapter 9

Wanderer
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

Calem was up before dawn the next morning, too restless to get much sleep. Wulfric had put the group up at a local inn just next door to the Gym and advised them to spend the rest of that first afternoon in Snowbelle shopping for clothing appropriate for the arctic conditions in the White Mountains. What they'd brought with them would not do. Calem let Grace pick everything out for him and tacitly accepted whatever she decided on without a fuss. Having something so commonplace and menial to do was good for her, took her mind off Serena for just a couple precious hours. There was hope. Wulfric would help them. They would find Serena. And Calem would protect Grace so that Serena would have her mother back at the end of all this. Nothing else mattered.

It took Calem several minutes to dress in his snow pants, boots, and blue parka after struggling with the long underwear and thermal undergarments he wore under the snow gear. It felt like he'd added twenty pounds to his normal weight with everything on, but Wulfric had warned them about the sub-zero temperatures in the White Mountains this time of year and the chilling winds that could induce frost bite after just minutes of exposure. Aegislash had been dormant in the corner of the small room, and Calem now hoisted her onto his back securely. Klefki, for once relegated to his Pokéball, remained there along with Bisharp and Staraptor. Calem had no plans to subject any of them to the cold when there was no need. Once ready to go, all that was left of Calem's getup were the thick goggles that would shield him from sun and wind and snow. He wore them loose around his neck as he went downstairs to the hotel lobby to wait for the others.

Alain and Korrina were already there sipping coffee and chatting in hushed tones. Like Calem, they were also outfitted in thermal snow gear from head to toe. A small duffel bag sat on the floor in between them with a spare parka, pants, and boots for Serena, Grace's idea. They had no idea what state she'd be in when they found her, and Grace wanted to be prepared. Korrina noticed Calem coming down the stairs and smiled.

"Hey, get any sleep last night?" she asked.

"Does it matter?" he said as he joined them in the lobby by the

crackling fireplace.

Calem could feel Alain's gaze on him, and he tried to ignore the crawly feeling in his scarred arms under the scrutiny.

"Grace just stepped out to get Wulfric," Alain said. "They should be back here soon."

"Here." Korrina handed Calem something wrapped up in tinfoil. "Breakfast. I know we're in a hurry to get going, but you should eat something. There's coffee and hot chocolate, too."

She poured him a cup of coffee without waiting to hear his answer, but Calem didn't argue and began to eat mechanically. He would need his strength for the road ahead, no doubt about it. This was the last leg of the journey. Soon, he would see Serena again and get her out safely. Soon, this would all be over.

As though sensing his thoughts, Aegislash's black ribbon feelers tightened their hold around his shoulders and neck, a silent reminder that she had his back through thick and thin.

The door to the lobby opened then and let in a gust of chilly wind from outside. Snow flurries fluttered through the threshold and melted on the hardwood floor under the fire's heat, and the clerk manning the front desk shivered visibly. Grace, Wulfric, and Imelda stepped inside, and Wulfric closed the door behind them. He carried a large pack on his broad shoulders, and unlike yesterday at the Gym, this time he was dressed properly for the weather in white camouflage. Grace caught Calem's eye as he wolfed down the rest of his breakfast, and she crossed the room to him.

"Everyone ready to go?" she asked, taking a minute to check over Calem's gear and make sure he was properly dressed.

"Yeah," Alain said. "Ready when you are."

Calem let Grace fuss as she checked his jacket and silently passed her the coffee Korrina had poured for him. She accepted it gratefully and took a few sips, letting the hot beverage warm her up a bit. Korrina watched them with mild interest.

"...and make sure any visitors talk to Anik," Wulfric was telling Imelda. "He's in charge while I'm gone. He knows what to do, so you listen to him, okay?"

"Yes, sir," Imelda said. "We'll see you back for Trivia Tuesday."

Wulfric looked truly saddened. "I'm afraid it's going to take a bit longer than a day. Darn it all, I had a good feeling about this week, too. Oh, well. But don't let my absence ruin the fun, all right?"

Imelda nodded and bit her lip. "Um, sir, please do be careful out there. Anik and the others and I will wait for you."

"Wulfric and Imelda packed us enough food for two weeks," Grace said between sips of coffee. "He says it should not take that long to find Serena, but just in case."

Calem noticed how her hands shook slightly as she gripped the coffee mug, and he laid his hand on her wrist without a word. She was startled at the contact, but he felt her relax a little bit in his hold.

"It won't take that long," Korrina said. "Grandpa told me that Wulfric led an expedition into the White Mountains years ago once when an avalanche buried a bunch of tourists skiing off resort. He found them and brought everyone back in a matter of days. Nobody knows those mountains like he does."

Grace seemed to take some comfort from Korrina's story and tried to smile. "Of course."

Were they dead or alive when he found them? Calem wanted to ask. But he stayed silent. He caught Alain's eye, and something in their shared look made him think Alain was having similar thoughts.

"Okay, gang," Wulfric bellowed. "Everybody ready to set off, then?"

The group gathered outside, and Imelda watched them from the path leading back to the Gym. She looked about ready to burst into tears as she waved.

"Good luck!" she called out.

Wulfric led the group west toward the edge of town on foot. Their snow boots and crampons crunched over the cobblestones and plowed snow in the streets. Calem lowered his goggles and marveled at how warm his clothes were. He hoped they would continue to keep him warm once they got up in altitude.

The trek to the edge of town was relatively short, and soon they had arrived on the outskirts where only a single packed trail led into the

White Mountains. The sun was rising behind them, and the sky was clear and blue. Calem followed the side of the nearest snowy peak up and up, awed by the raw and brutal majesty of nature. Grey stone peeked out from under windblown snow higher up, and pine trees hardy enough to brave the cold grew along the mountain faces at lower altitudes. Harsh winds thousands of feet above blew snow from the mountainsides, swirls of powder white, beautiful but deadly. If an avalanche were triggered, there would be nowhere to run in this frozen desert.

"The path here leads into the heart of the mountains," Wulfric said. "But beyond a couple miles, it's all animal trails and unmarked passages. Easy to get lost forever in the white."

"Great," Alain said, obviously not feeling great about that at all.

"Do you know where Team Flare might be holding my daughter?" Grace asked. "Is there somewhere in the mountains they might go?"

Wulfric thought about that. "Can't say for sure, but there are tunnels that run through a whole maze under the mountains. Might be they're using them for that secret lab you mentioned. Anyway, we'll have a better idea once we're higher up."

Wulfric unclipped two of his four Pokéballs from his belt and tossed them out in front of him. Within the flash of light, two behemoth Pokémon materialized and shook the ground with their sudden weight. Calem gaped at their massive size and girth. He'd never seen Pokémon so large before.

A Mamoswine taller and older than any employed in the city for plowing towered about fifteen feet at the shoulder, and her long ivory tusks were sharpened to wicked points and capped with silver plating at the tips for extra attacking power. Her woolly brown hide was shaggy and thick and made Calem feel cold in his high tech snow gear by comparison.

But perhaps even more impressive was Wulfric's Avalugg. While only about seven feet tall, Avalugg boasted considerable girth and could have carried a busload of people on his back. His body was covered in plated white and blue scales dusted with ice crystals, and when it caught the sun's light, it sparkled like a living diamond. His breath came out misty and froze over the snow on the ground.

Wulfric carried two bundles under his arms, one of which he tossed up onto Avalugg's wide flat back. The other he handed to Korrina. It was

a thick woven blanket.

"You two will ride Mamoswine. Throw this on her and stay warm," he said. "Grace, Calem, you're with me 'n Avalugg. Come on, now, I'll give ya a leg up."

Grace was frozen in her place, stunned at the sight of these two enormous Pokémon. Calem swallowed and moved first, allowing Wulfric to give him a boost onto Avalugg's back. It was surprisingly flat, but his hands slipped on the thin sheen of ice that covered Avalugg's scales. He fumbled for the blanket and did his best to unroll it while Wulfric hoisted Grace up by the waist. Calem gave her a hand up, and she stumbled on her rear on the blanket.

"What is this thing?" she whispered to Calem.

"Our ride, apparently," he said.

Alain and Korrina managed to get Mamoswine to kneel for them so Alain could boost Korrina onto her back, and she hauled him up after her like he weighed nothing. Wulfric used Avalugg's craggy back leg to climb up, and soon everybody was situated. Wulfric crawled to the front, where he could sit just behind Avalugg's head and direct the behemoth, while Grace and Calem sat back to back just behind him. If not for the blanket, Calem was sure he would literally freeze his ass off sitting on this mobile glacier for more than five minutes.

Korrina laughed suddenly as Mamoswine snorted and shook out her head. Alain sat behind her with his arms wrapped around her middle to hold on, the blanket pulled up over their legs. He whispered something to her, and she smiled wider. Calem's hands twitched uncomfortably as he watched them in that private moment, able to find some joy in each other despite the bleak situation, and his throat burned. Frowning, he looked away, not wanting to see them like that.

Serena's in trouble and they're flirting, he thought bitterly.

And yet, despite the simmering resentment their intimacy incited in him, he could not help but wonder what it must be like to feel what they felt. To have that shared connection with another person. Alain had done some awful things in his time, but somehow he'd found happiness with Korrina. It didn't seem fair. If Serena were here...

Calem began to shake as his thoughts muddled together like a thousand voices howling in his head, and he hugged his ruined arms around himself. Shame replaced his earlier resentment, but the

jealousy lingered, ugly and selfish.

I don't deserve to even think about her like that. Not after the way it all went down.

"*It's not your fault,"* Alain had insisted that night on the moors east of Laverre. *"It's nobody's fault but Malva's what happened to Serena."*

When this was all over, he would tell Serena everything. If they got to her in time, if she was still alive, he would tell her everything he'd been hiding from her so at least she would know, and he could learn to cherish their friendship for what it was as he once had. Never again would he take her presence in his life for granted. They had to find her alive and holding on. They had to.

Avalugg lurched as he climbed the mountain path, surefooted for such a large Pokémon. The ride was surprisingly smooth despite the incline. Mamoswine lumbered along behind them, and Korrina waved to Calem when she saw him looking. They passed the time in relative silence, with Wulfric concentrating on navigating and Alain and Korrina keeping an eye out behind them for any feral Pokémon or other threats.

After a few hours of slow progress, the winds began to pick up and the skies began to darken with the onset of clouds. Calem's nose burned with the cold despite the thick scarf he wore around his face and neck, and he rubbed it worriedly. Grace shivered behind him. Avalugg growled under them as he steadily climbed, the beaten path long lost to them and only Wulfric's knowledge of the terrain to guide them.

"Hey, that doesn't look good," Alain called out.

Calem followed his gaze to the sky, which was rapidly turning grey. No, it didn't look good at all. The temperature was dropping noticeably, and Grace shifted on Avalugg's back.

"Wulfric, it looks like a storm," she said.

"A storm," he repeated. "That's one way to put it."

He said nothing more, and they lapsed into silence once more as Avalugg trudged onward like he was oblivious to the plummeting temperatures. Calem and Grace huddled together unconsciously seeking extra warmth, but soon he became unable to control his shivering. His jaw ached as he clenched it hard enough to keep his teeth from chattering. He was suddenly very sleepy.

The winds picked up, howling, and sprayed the group with snow flurries loosened from the mountainside. The sunlight dulled to a filmy pale glow, obscured by the clouds, and not long after, the heavens began to rain down fat snowflakes. Which would have been beautiful if not for the winds that whipped them violently about and turned them to icy pinpricks on Calem's face. He tried to snuggle into his scarf and pulled his hat down, but no matter how covered he thought he was, he could still feel winter's bite. Mamoswine trumpeted behind him, agitated by the deteriorating weather, but Avalugg remained cool and unencumbered.

"Hey! We're gonna freeze in this!" Korrina shouted up to Calem's group.

"It's not much farther," Wulfric raised his voice to be heard over the tempest. "Hold onto your pantaloons, everybody."

A particularly strong wind made Grace and Calem lose their balance, and they stumbled over each other. Calem swore as he scrambled to stop the falling sensation and peered over Avalugg's side. Just a few inches away, the mountain face dropped off completely for a few hundred feet. He was too cold even to curse as vertigo made him nauseous.

"Avalugg!" Wulfric shouted. "Use Avalanche!"

Calem scrambled back toward Grace just as Avalugg shifted underneath him and stomped the ground with his clubby feet. The snow above and in front of them came loose and began to cascade down the mountain's face with increasing velocity and ferocity. Mamoswine trumpeted in distress, but the snow slide crashed down in front, safely missing the group. Calem stared in awe as the path before them opened up into the mouth of a cave. Avalugg trampled the dispersed snow and ice, clearing a path inside. Calem had to duck to keep his head from hitting the roof of the cavern, and Wulfric dismounted once inside. He helped Grace down, and then Calem after.

"We'll have to wait out the storm," Wulfric explained.

Mamoswine lumbered in after Avalugg, and Korrina jumped off her back gracefully like only a Bellatrix could. She gave Alain a hand down. Wulfric recalled both Mamoswine and Avalugg and headed deeper into the cave.

"This way," he said.

Calem followed, grateful to be leaving the howling winds behind. They hiked deep into the mountain through the natural caves, twisting and turning to the point where Calem wasn't sure he'd be able to find the entrance if he turned back. If Wulfric didn't know what he was doing, they would surely be lost in this labyrinth. Grace walk resolutely ahead of Calem, her head held high as she followed Wulfric without a word, trusting that he knew what he was doing. Calem hoped the Gym Leader wouldn't let her down.

"Here we are," Wulfric said at length.

They had arrived at a cavern large enough to house the entire group and then some. The remains of an old campfire sat in the middle of the cavern, charred and brittle. A small stack of wood sat to the left, assembled by whoever had been here last, apparently. Wulfric retrieved two fresh logs for the campfire and produced a small box of matches to get a fire started.

"So now what?" Alain asked. "It's too early to camp."

"Tell that to the storm," Wulfric said gruffly. "Unless you'd like to wander about snow blind, Titan."

Alain crossed his arms. "No, of course not."

Wulfric got the fire started, and Calem warmed his hands against the flames gratefully. He hadn't realized how much he'd been shaking thanks to the storm. Ice crystals dusted Wulfric's beard and mustache like tiny diamonds, glistening as they melted under the campfire's warmth.

"How long do storms out here last?" Korrina asked. "We'll need every minute we can afford to get to Serena."

"Hard to say," Wulfric said. "But we ought to rest here for at least a bit. These mountains will kill you without you even knowing it if you push too hard."

While Calem did not doubt that, he agreed with Korrina. Time was of the essence. Who knew what Serena was going through at this very moment? Maybe them wasting time here was sealing her fate without them even knowing it. He couldn't abide such a thought.

"Can't we navigate the tunnels or something?" Calem said.

"We could, but we'd be lost," Wulfric said. "The White Mountains're

near impossible to navigate around winter unless you've got exact coordinates. The caves're impossible all year round. Steelix and Onix dug these caves years ago. They go all over the mountain range, and nobody's ever mapped them all out. You run into a Steelix out here, and that's the end o' you."

"But we can't waste any more time," Grace insisted. "We have to find Serena."

Wulfric looked genuinely abashed. "I understand, Grace. But in this storm, it's unsafe for us to keep searching. For now. I know you want to find your daughter, but we need to wait until the winds subside. Otherwise, we'll all be in trouble and we won't do Serena any good at all."

"Wulfric's right," Alain said. "I want to find Serena as fast as possible, too, but we're no good to her dead. Let's wait a few hours, and then we'll see what the situation is."

Grace did not look happy about this, but there was little choice in the matter. Calem did not want to run in to hostile Steelix and Onix down here with no escape. Unlike Alain and his Dragons, Calem could not coerce Steel-type Pokémon against their will to guarantee the group's safety. Only Titans could do that, he thought bitterly. He sat by the fire and hugged his knees to his chest, cursing his own limitations.

They rested for a few hours, eating and napping to replenish their strength. They'd been outside for hours without a break, and Calem did not realize how hungry he was. It would be dark outside by now, and in the distance the storm winds continued to howl. Grace tried to sleep, but she tossed and turned and shivered in her dreams, and Calem could not abide her silent suffering for long. He laid a gentle hand on her shoulder, and she jerked erratically into his touch before calming somewhat. He did not want to wake her, but he could imagine the nightmares that visited her now. He'd seen his fair share in recent weeks.

Korrina was also napping by the fire, but she did not stir as Grace had. Wulfric had his eyes closed and his arms crossed as he leaned against his pack, but Calem wondered if he was truly asleep. Something about Wulfric told of a hardened man who could not be caught off-guard by even the sneakiest of people. In any case, Calem didn't bother to test his theory.

Alain was awake and staring into the fire, his expression sullen as

though deep in thought. Calem hesitated a moment and touched a hand to Aegislash's feelers wrapped around his shoulders. Aegislash was always there for him, always at his side, even now. She had not stirred during their hike, content to remain dormant until Calem needed her strength. He drew strength from her now, telling himself to just get over it. They were in this together, after all. They wanted the same thing. And Alain had promised to take care of Malva once and for all.

Calem scooted closer to where Alain was seated. "You seem pretty calm," he said.

Alain met Calem's eye through the fire. "Just thinking."

"About Malva?"

"It's hard not to."

Calem watched him a moment, but Alain settled his gaze back on the dancing flames and retreated into himself. *Titans lie*. That was what everybody said. Alain was supposed to be one of the good ones, someone on Calem's side, on Serena's side. But even so, it was easy to see why they said that about Titans, that you couldn't trust them, that they kept secrets. Alain was no exception, but the lies he told and the secrets he kept aligned with the group's goals. Did that matter? Calem wondered. There was so much he didn't know about Alain, that he didn't say. Did Serena know?

"Something on your mind, Calem?" Alain said.

Calem clenched his jaw. He'd been staring, lost in thought, and Alain had noticed. "Just thinking."

Alain chuckled, low and rich. Fire and mirth danced together in his blue eyes. "Touché."

Calem shook his head. "I still don't get it."

"Oh?"

"How you can disappear for years, then all of a sudden you can jump back in and risk your life like nothing's changed."

"You're asking how I can bring myself to drop everything and help a friend whose life is in trouble?" Alain said slowly.

"That's not—you know what I mean."

"I'm not sure I do. Why don't you help me out?"

Calem touched one of Aegislash's feelers, and it wrapped gently around his hand. The spectral sword's presence at his side was a reassurance he needed, if only to keep his cool and remember the bigger picture here.

"I mean," Calem began, careful to choose his words and keep his voice down. "I mean, you left a long time ago. Do you even remember Serena much?"

Alain gave him a weird look. "Do I... Calem, I wouldn't be here if I didn't remember my time with Serena."

"What do you remember?" Calem pressed.

Alain looked like he wanted to question Calem further, but thought better of it. "I..." Alain cut himself off as his gaze unfocused somewhere far away. "Brownies."

"What?"

"Serena loved brownies. I remember the first time she came to Sycamore's lab, she wandered outside of her room after her bedtime. She didn't like the food she'd been brought for dinner, and one of the night shift security guards caught her wandering the floor in her nightgown, lost. He tried to take her back to her room, it was like two in the morning, and I was just heading up to bed after finishing up some work. I convinced the guard to let me put her back to bed, and when she explained that she was hungry, I snuck her into the kitchen downstairs."

Alain laughed to himself as he remembered.

"I told her there was leftover food in the fridge, but she didn't want any of it. I didn't blame her, cafeteria fare doesn't make for good leftovers. So I asked her what she wanted to eat, and her eyes got really big, you know the way."

"I know," Calem said without thinking.

Alain was smiling softly. "She said she wanted brownies, but we didn't have any. And then I..." He trailed off and his smile faded. "I stayed up with her for the next two hours making brownies from scratch. We

dirtied up the whole kitchen using like thirty different dishes, it was ridiculous. She spilled batter on her nightgown, and Tyrunt nearly ripped it trying to lick it all up. I never baked anything in my life before, but she wanted the brownies, and I... Well, I guess I wanted her to smile."

He looked up at Calem then like he'd only just seen him sitting there.

"I remember she was a lonely girl, and I wanted to make her smile. She was lonely and afraid like a kid that age should never be. I was like her. I knew what it felt like to be completely alone surrounded by people who don't understand or trust you." Alain leaned forward and held Calem's gaze. "Serena was alone for a long time, until she met you."

"Me? I... I mean, we were friends, but she was always talking about you. Every time she came back to the lab, it was Alain this and Alain that," Calem said.

"That's not how I remember it. I remember that I was busy doing fieldwork for Sycamore. More often than not, I'd miss a lot of time out of Serena's visits. But you were always there with her."

Calem shook his head. "No, that's not... I mean, yeah, we hung out a lot, but you—"

"Calem," Alain said gently. "I tried to spend time with Serena in between my work with Sycamore whenever I could, but you were the one who was there all the time. You were there for her in a way no one else was. Don't you remember that?"

Calem said nothing. He did remember the way Serena used to be, reticent and closed off and always by herself. She never confided in others, never opened up, and as a child, Calem hadn't minded that because he had plenty to say for the both of them. The first day he'd met Serena, he shared his deepest secret, how he was a Steel Adamantine with near unbreakable skin. Not even a knife could cut his skin when he was concentrating, just as he'd shown Serena. That was the first time he'd ever seen her smile, when she found out he was the same as her. That she wasn't the only one.

"What's Serena like now?" Alain asked.

"Now?"

"You're her best friend. You know her better than anyone. You risked

your life to help her, so you must care about her a lot."

"Yeah, of course I do." Calem rubbed his arm where Malva's scars were hidden. "I'd do anything for Serena."

"Is she still lonely?"

Calem thought about that. She'd laughed a lot the last time he saw her in Vaniville Town, before all this. They had spent hours together just walking, talking, laughing about any silly thought that crossed their minds, just like they had in their first meeting years ago at Sycamore's lab. Even then, she'd smiled and laughed as they played swords on the terrace and nothing in the world mattered but the two of them. Every moment they could get, Serena and Calem spent it together.

"No," he said at length. "No, she..."

An image of Serena's smiling face the last time he'd seen her popped into his mind, those blue eyes full of wonder as she traced the invisible threads that connected them. Heartstrings, she called them, because they were manifestations of the heart that could never lie. And no matter where Calem went, she could always find him, just as the Fairies that loved her so much could always find her. She was never alone because the heartstrings connected them.

"*All Fairies can see heartstrings. It's how they find me.*"

"She..." Calem said as the memories clouded his mind.

"She...what? Calem? Are you there?" Alain said.

"*So when I take Klefki, you can always find me?*"

"Klefki," Calem said, his thoughts racing. "Klefki!"

Grace stirred in her sleep as Calem raised his voice and opened her groggy eyes.

"Uh, what about Klefki?" Alain said.

Korrina rolled over, also woken by the conversation. "Hey, keep it down, guys?"

Calem was having trouble forming words, and he unzipped his parka to fish out Klefki's Pokéball. "No, it's Klefki!" he said.

"Calem?" Grace said. "What's going on?"

Calem ignored the others and released Klefki's Pokéball. The little Keychain Pokémon floated in the air, and the sound of tinkling keys echoed in the chamber. When he saw Calem, he jingled happily and swayed in front of him, wanting attention.

Korrina was fully awake now, and Alain had gotten to his feet. "Someone wanna tell me what's going on?" Korrina demanded.

"Klefki," Calem said to the little Pokémon. "Is Serena nearby?"

Alain and Korrina exchanged a look, and Grace stood next to Calem. "Serena? Calem, what're you—"

"Klefki, is she here? Is she close?" Calem continued.

Klefki swayed as though riding invisible waves, and Calem's heart raced as he drifted toward the entrance. He got up and followed him.

"Has he lost it?" Korrina hissed.

"No, I think it's something else," Alain said, following Calem.

They went to the mouth of the cav, where the storm was still blowing outside and blasting snow through the entrance. Klefki stopped abruptly and jingled in earnest like he wanted to go out. Calem broke into a smile for the first time since Serena's abduction.

"Klefki!" he said, smiling wide.

"Hey," Alain said. "What's going on?"

"Yeah, it's freezing over here," Korrina grumbled.

Korrina, Alain, and Grace had all followed him to the entrance. Grace was staring at him like she didn't recognize him smiling. Her eyes, eyes that matched Serena's, were glazed with unshed tears as she started to realize what was happening.

"It's the heartstrings," Calem said, overwhelmed by the urge to laugh. "Serena can see them because Fairies can see them."

"Okay, and?" Korrina said, shivering.

"She said she'd always be able to find me because she can follow the heartstrings," Calem said. "Klefki's a Fairy, too."

"Klefki can find Serena," Alain said, shocked.

"He can follow the heartstrings right to her," Calem said.

Grace choked on a sob and covered her mouth, but her smile was still plain to see.

"Oh my god," Korrina said. "That's..."

"That's how we find Serena," Calem said. He caught Alain's eye. "That's why she wanted us to share Klefki, so I could always have a way to find her. So she'd never be alone."

Grace was suddenly in Calem's face and hugged him fiercely. She was shaking as she cried, but she was laughing, too. Klefki, happy at all the attention he was getting, floated about their heads jingling.

Malva had not gotten much sleep thanks to food poisoning she'd suffered at dinner last night, and she was in a black mood today as a result. All she could keep down were saltine crackers and scotch, a faulty combination that only soured her mood even further. She wanted a good night's sleep. She wanted to get out of this godforsaken cave hideout and feel warm again. She wanted to feel Siebold's arms around her.

But Laevus had insisted she stay and see what he had accomplished. So Malva put off her return trip to Lumiose City by a few days. The trouble was, that had been two days ago, and Laevus had not emerged from his private room and lab yet to announce his grand success. When Malva tried to talk to him, he told her he was still working and that he was not to be disturbed, but that he would share his progress soon.

Well, fuck 'soon'. Malva was tired of waiting. She was tired of babysitting these two kids Laevus still kept locked up even though it appeared that he was through with them. She was tired. And speaking of the kids, the more useless of the two, the pleb boy, was crying again. Malva had almost forgotten he was still alive. Maybe she ought to put the poor boy out of his misery. Maybe then she could get some sleep.

Groaning, Malva got up from her desk in the small bedroom she was living out of and headed down the cavern hall to the kids' room. Pyroar had been napping on her bed and stretched out luxuriously when she heard her get up. The big cat padded along after her, and Darumaka rolled along next, not wanting to be left behind. Malva unlocked the door to the shared room and let herself inside, intending

to stop the wailing with words or by force, whatever worked.

"It's okay, Trevor, just breathe," Serena soothed the younger boy.

Trevor was deathly pale and clammy with fever sweat. He was lying on his stomach on a cot, shirtless, and Serena was doing her best to clean the weeping wound on his back and wrap him in fresh bandages. She could not do much with just soapy water, though.

"What the hell is going on in here?" Malva grumbled.

Pyroar slinked past her into the room and growled at the foul stench of decaying flesh. Darumaka huddled behind Malva's ankles.

Serena had a haunted look in her eyes, the look of someone who had had just as rough a night as Malva. Bandages wrapped around her wrists and arms past the elbow, a token of Laevus's blood draws. Otherwise, Serena was physically unharmed if not gaunt and malnourished. Her hair was a mess and pulled back in a tangled ponytail, and she wore clothes a couple sizes too big for her courtesy of whatever spares were lying around the base. Trevor was sobbing on the cot, but he did his best to stifle his suffering now that Malva was here.

"I'm trying to clean his wounds, but I don't know anything about medicine," Serena stammered. "He woke up in a lot of pain, but all I could find was soap and water. He needs antibiotics or something."

Malva wished she hadn't left the bottle of scotch back in her room, cheap gasoline that it was, but at least it was something. The kid was sobbing and shivering, and it didn't look like he was going to shut up anytime soon. Cursing Laevus for whatever the fuck he'd done to the kid, she marched over to the cot to take a look.

Serena watched her carefully, those luminous blue eyes sharp and alert in spite of her obvious physical exhaustion. "Can you do anything for him?"

Malva scoffed and was about to tell the girl off when she got a good whiff of Trevor and recoiled. She covered her nose and mouth with a hand and took a step back, and her eyes watered. Cursing, she ripped off her tinted sunglasses and shoved them in a pocket to wipe her eyes.

"What the fuck," she said, shoving Serena aside.

In her weakened state, Serena didn't put up much of a fight and fell back. Malva overcame the initial shock and took a moment to study Trevor's injury. The hole where Laevus had embedded that Mega Stone shard or whatever the fuck it was had turned yellowish green with infection, and the edges of the flayed skin and muscle beneath had taken on a suspicious grey-brown color. Malva was no physician, but she'd had the basic field training all Flare Agents got, and she did not like what she was seeing.

"What's wrong with him?" Serena pressed.

"The wound is infected," Malva said more to herself than to Serena. "The flesh and muscle are necrotic there." She indicated the greyish tissue surrounded by swelling and infection. How long had the kid been like this? If he didn't get treatment, he'd die in a day, two at the most.

"What does that mean?" Serena pressed.

Malva crossed her arms. "He's dying."

Serena's jaw dropped. "No, no that can't happen. You have to do something."

"I'm not a doctor. And death would be a mercy after..." she trailed off. "It'll be over soon."

"S-Serena," Trevor said, barely a whisper.

Serena set her jaw and put a reassuring hand on Trevor's shoulder, careful not to touch any of the afflicted area. "I'm right here, Trevor. You'll be okay, I promise."

Malva snorted. "What did I say about making promises you can't keep? You're being cruel."

She half expected some angry retort, but Serena only looked at her with that hollow gaze she'd worn the last time they spoke and Serena accused her of loving her brother. And of hating him, too. Malva hated that look on this girl who didn't know her, didn't know a goddamned thing about her. She had no right to judge.

"Help him," Serena said.

Malva pressed her lips together in a thin line. "Are you deaf, Magus? This kid will be dead by tonight."

"No. Not if you help him. Malva, please."

Please.

She'd said please the last time, too. Pyroar did not want to get too close to the stench of death, but Darumaka was watching shyly at Malva's feet, curiously unbothered. What the hell did Malva care about some no-name pleb kid, anyway? Nothing, that's what. Nothing at all.

Trevor groaned, and Malva got a look at his face. *So young.* This kid couldn't be more than fifteen or sixteen, and he was skinny and small. The very definition of weak. The world would not even notice his passing. He was nothing. And yet, she'd helped him once before.

"I know you want to help," Serena said in that infuriating calm she had, like she was old and wise and *not* a twenty-something *child.*

"You don't know anything about me," Malva said.

"I know you're not a bad person," Serena insisted. "You hate this."

Malva moved so fast that Serena didn't know what hit her. She was smashed against the wall in an instant, Malva's hand around her throat. But Serena did not fight back even as she gasped for air.

"Go ahead," Malva spat. "Tell me something else I hate."

"Y-You hate," Serena gasped, "being wasted."

Malva squeezed Serena's neck, but not hard enough to choke her to death. Her thoughts were all over the place, and it was hard to pick out a coherent string of thoughts from the jumble. Words were little better.

"You hate what he's made you become," Serena said, barely audible.

It would be so easy. She could snap Serena's neck and be done with it, never think about it again. Laevus would be cross, but he'd have his blood bag intact either way, so it made no difference. And Malva would have another death on her hands. Who cared? She'd lost count a long time ago. Lysandre had a lot of requests.

Serena struggled to suck in a breath. "But you hate yourself the most."

Malva bared her teeth, and her fingers began to smoke where they gripped Serena. The girl squeezed her eyes shut to the pain, and tears

prickled the edges. Furious and frustrated, Malva shoved her aside roughly before she could do any real damage. Serena's neck bore an angry red rash where Malva had touched her, the skin boiled and a little bloody, smoking. It would sting like a bitch, but the wound was nothing too serious. Serena coughed and shielded her throat, but she did her best to hold Malva's gaze anyway.

"You want to help him," she insisted, her voice hoarse and laced with pain. "You *can* help him."

"You're a piece of work," Malva said rudely. She glanced at Trevor's diseased back with disgust. "All I can do is give him more pain."

"But it could save him," Serena insisted, seemingly oblivious to her own hurts as she focused on Trevor's. "You can do it. Malva, please. It's okay to want to help him."

There was that goddamned 'please' again. Was she getting soft? Or was this girl, this Magus, doing it all? They were all dead, the Magi. They'd died out long ago, and she was the last as far as anyone knew. Who was she, really? Why did she know these things? Why didn't she use her knowledge to help herself instead of this worthless pleb boy?

"*It's okay to be weak sometimes,"* Laevus's voice reminded her, so far away, so long ago. He probably didn't even remember saying that to her.

Well, Laevus wasn't fucking here.

Malva took a Pokéball from her pocket and released Delphox. The Psychic fox bared her teeth at the stench of death permeating the stagnant room, but she had a little more grace than Pyroar and remained where she stood next to Malva. Darumaka rolled out of her way and jumped up on the cot to be next to Serena. Right now, Malva did not give a shit about him being near her. It was the other kid that concerned her.

She kneeled down and took Trevor's chin in her hand. It was sticky and wet with sweat, and she had to fight to keep her expression neutral. "Kid, you want to live?"

Trevor's eyes were filled with tears, but he managed to nod. "Y-Yes," he rasped.

Malva searched his face for the lie, for the weakness his body betrayed, but she found none. Sixteen and brave. It was not something

most could say knowing what was coming next. She had to give him credit.

"This will hurt," she said a little more gently.

Malva cracked her knuckles and nodded to Delphox, who began to pulse with blue telekinetic energy. She laid her bare hand over the infected wound on Trevor's back and dug her nails into the necrotic flesh. Heat seeped from her palm into his back, and Trevor began to howl in pain as the burning consumed him. It ate away at the rot, the muscle beneath, and bone beneath that. Trevor thrashed, but Delphox's Confusion held him down like invisible manacles.

Serena laid her hands on Trevor's head and whispered reassurances to him, but they fell upon deaf ears. Even so, she kept it up. Darumaka watched with rapt attention as he held his feet in his hands and rocked next to Serena. Malva's work was done fast. As soon as she had burned away the necrotic and rotting flesh, she withdrew. Trevor continued to sob and shake uncontrollably, but all that was left of the terrible wound in his back was a raw red sore, cauterized and no longer discharging. Smoke rose from the open sore, but that would dissipate soon enough. Malva dunked her hand in the soapy water and washed it thoroughly, then she tossed Serena the fresh roll of bandages.

"You handle the rest. I want to take a nap, and I better not hear any more crying coming from here," Malva said.

Serena had tears in her eyes and she was smiling when she looked at Malva. "I will," she said, breathless. "Malva, thank you."

"Whatever," Malva said dismissively.

She recalled Delphox and snatched Darumaka up in her arms, not trusting Serena with him. Darumaka squealed in protest, wanting to stay behind, but Malva held firm. Pyroar was happy to be leaving finally.

"Malva," Serena called.

"*What*?" Malva spat.

"You're a good person," she said.

Malva glared at her. *Stupid girl, you're only here because of me. I'm not a good person.*

But she said nothing and simply locked the door behind her, ready to try to sleep off whatever the fuck this was. Maybe she was drunk. If not, she wished she was. Back in her room, Malva lay back on the bed and Pyroar curled up next to her, radiating heat. Darumaka climbed onto the desk where Serena's Pokéballs were sitting in a dish collecting dust. Malva ran her fingers through Pyroar's long crest, and the big cat began to purr.

I'm not a good person, Malva thought angrily. *She's an idiot.*

Malva's breath hitched, and she curled up on her side. Pyroar was at her back as warm as a furnace, and if she closed her eyes, she could almost imagine it was Siebold sleeping at her back.

I'm not a good person.

He would be snoring softly, like he always did. Soft but not unpleasant, and he would smell of rosemary and candles and rain, nothing like this place. He would slip his arm over her waist, and smile when her skin burned him. He said it tickled.

I'm not a good person.

Trevor would live.

After the storm subsided, it took another two days to reach their destination. Grace could hardly feel her fingers and toes, try as she might to warm them under blankets of wool and fur. The sky was overcast with the threat of snow, and the wind was blistering and harsh as ever. But the cold no longer bothered her as adrenaline and fear and even a little hope became her fuel. Klefki could find Serena, Calem said. Klefki could see the heartstrings, those invisible threads Serena could see, too, the ones that always led her home whenever she snuck out to the woods. No matter how far she went. Grace could hardly believe it, but here they were at the mouth of a cave barricaded by enormous metal doors frozen shut. The very curse that had stolen Serena away and forever isolated Grace from her daughter had become the very thing that led Grace back to her.

"Is this it?" Alain said when Mamoswine and Avalugg stopped in front of the metal doors.

"Can't say I ever saw metal doors out in these mountains," Wulfric said. "Hey, little guy, you sure about this place?"

Klefki jingled excitedly, seemingly oblivious to the cold. His jeweled heart pulsated with a soft pink light.

"He's sure," Calem said. "Klefki can see heartstrings. They don't lie."

Klefki danced lazily around between Grace and Calem, pleased at all the attention and good feelings emanating from the humans around him. Could he really sense her emotions? This little Pokémon that had always unsettled her with his jingling, that hollow stare all of Serena's Fairies had, that Serena herself had whenever she knew Grace was hiding something, lying, holding back. Did she know all along?

"Thank you, Klefki," Grace said as Klefki hovered in front of her. She didn't know what else to say.

"Great, then let's knock, shall we?" Korrina slipped off of Mamoswine's back and landed in knee-deep snow.

The mountain path here was wide enough to accommodate large Pokémon or even transport vehicles. The sealed cave cut into the mountain, but there was no way of knowing how deep it went or where it came out.

"Oh, I don't know if they'll hear us knocking," Wulfric said.

"Then we'll knock loudly. Alain, you wanna do the honors?" Korrina held out a hand for him to jump down, and he joined her in the snow.

"Absolutely," he said, tossing out a Pokéball from his pocket.

Grace quailed at the sheer enormity of the monster that had been riding around in that tiny Pokéball all this time unbeknownst to her. Tyrantrum's flesh was a ruddy red, like the skin had been sloughed off and all that was left were bloody muscles. He was almost as big as Mamoswine, but where Mamoswine was a gentle giant, Tyrantrum was fear and violence given flesh. Grace had never seen teeth so big.

Mamoswine trumpeted in alarm, and Wulfric had to calm her down. Tyrantrum was salivating unabashedly, and Grace wondered if he wouldn't try to take a bite out of Mamoswine if given the chance. How could Alain keep such a creature around and under control?

Wulfric whistled appreciatively. "That's a big pet you've got there, Alain."

"He likes to cuddle," Alain quipped. "Tyrantrum, break down that

door."

Tyrantrum growled, and Grace almost lost control of her bladder at the baleful sound. Tyrantrum lowered his huge flat head and charged at the door. The metal whined under the force of the impact, and an ugly dent warped the metal.

"Again," Alain commanded.

He rushed the door a second time, and then a third time, and by the fourth Head Smash, the frozen metal burst and Tyrantrum plowed on through the gaping hole. he turned around inside and shook out his head like a dog trying to get dry, like ramming solid steel had given him little more than a tickle. His great mane of primitive white feathers was heavy with frost and iron dust.

"Well, that's something you don't get to see every day," Wulfric said merrily. He recalled Mamoswine and Avalugg, but he was in no hurry to go through the now open cave. Instead, he sat down in the snow and rifled through his pack for pen and paper.

"What are you doing?" Grace asked him.

"Oh, just writing a letter to my brother. He'll be mighty interested to know about this place."

"Will he send reinforcements?" Calem asked, peering over Wulfric's shoulder at the chicken scratch he was hastily scrawling across the parchment.

"Oh yes, Remus is what you young people might call a worrywart. Always did have a cautious streak. When we left, he was already calling in the Snow Rangers and assembling rescue teams."

"Snow Rangers?" Grace said. "And they can help?"

"I do believe that's their job." Wulfric finished his letter after checking his PokéNav watch and jotting down the coordinates. "Although, you know, sometimes I wonder if a hundred Snow Rangers standing by to help out just the five of us might be a bit much."

"A-A hundred?" Calem said. "We could wipe out all of Team Flare here with that many!"

Wulfric got to his feet and pulled out a Pokéball from his jacket pocket. A squat Delibird landed in the snow at his feet and squawked

indignantly. "Like I said, it's not safe coming up here in the winter, but now that we know exactly where we're going, well, my brother does like a bit of glory whenever he can get it. Come on now, Delibird, take this."

Wulfric handed Delibird the sealed note, and the red-feathered bird stuffed it among her enormously bushy tail feathers.

"Uh, is that safe?" Calem said. Klefki was fascinated with Delibird's fluffy tail and wanted to know where Wulfric's note had disappeared to.

"Hm? Oh, Delibird here's a master postwoman. She'll be fine. You get on back to Mayor Remus now, Delibird. And no unnecessary stops along the way, okay? I know you got plenty of food in your tail, so no getting greedy, now."

Delibird honked and took to the sky. Grace watched as the winds buffeted the delivery bird this way and that, and she felt a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. Help depended on some derpy bird that couldn't even fly straight. Wulfric's meaty hand on her shoulder startled her.

"I know she doesn't look like much, but Delibird's the best navigator in a snowstorm you ever saw," he said.

Grace nodded. "I suppose you would know best."

He smiled warmly. "Now then, let's go get your daughter back."

"Hey, guys?" Korrina said. "Looks like this cave goes in pretty deep. There's lights in the walls. I think we found our hideout."

"Great, let's go. Klefki, lead the way," Calem said, following Alain and Korrina into the cave.

Wulfric and Grace brought up the rear, and once inside, Grace had a sudden feeling of claustrophobia despite the cavern's enormity. She shivered and hugged herself, but Wulfric's wide frame next to her offered some comfort. He was a Gym Leader, maybe the strongest of them all in Kalos, and he was here to help.

"Thank you, Wulfric," she said, "for doing all this. I'm... I don't know what I would've done without your help."

"Well now, Grace, if you don't mind my saying so, I think you

would've found a way to help Serena with or without my help."

"No I'm... I'm just a pleb. I can't do what you can do. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you and them."

He chuckled warmly. "Oh, I don't know about that. And besides, you're a lot stronger than you think. What's that they say about books and covers? I always liked that saying."

Grace thought of Delibird flying alone back to Snowbelle, such a small thing entrusted with such an important task, and Wulfric had every confidence in her. Grace bit her lip.

"I have a feeling the hardest part is still ahead," she confided in him. "And I'm afraid."

Wulfric smiled down at her. He had a warm and friendly face despite his nature. She had misjudged him when they first met, she realized. They all had. He was not cold at all. He just wanted to help.

"That's all right. I'm afraid, too. But you know something? I think when we have to face our fears, we find out who we really are. You're a mother who wants to help her daughter. No amount of fear can change that, all it can do is give you a reason to fight harder."

Tears stung Grace's eyes at his sincerity, and she rubbed them hastily so he wouldn't see. When Malva had shown up to kidnap Serena and Calem fought her alone, Grace could hardly move from the sidewalk. She had been so afraid, for Serena and for herself, that she could not even make herself move. Now, she had crossed a continent and joined forces with some of the strongest Pokémon trainers around, and she had braved the treacherous White Mountains. If someone had told her a month ago that this was where she would be, descending deeper into the mountain hideout of a mad scientist in search of her missing daughter, Grace would never have believed it.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I want to believe that."

Korrina and her Pangoro were leading the march, and Alain and Heliolisk followed with Calem and Klefki. Heliolisk's Flash lit up the dark cave enough to see in front of them, but there was no substitute for the Dark-type Pangoro's night vision. His furry black coattails dragged on the stone floor behind it, a soft scraping sound that reminded Grace of Bugs scuttling. She felt like the walls had eyes and were watching her, but that was silly. It was just nerves. She dug around in her pocket for Rhyhorn's and Fletchling's Pokéballs anyway,

just to hold onto something.

"Hey, up there," Korrina said. "Calem, I think Pangoro found something. Is this the right way?"

Calem jogged to catch up with Korrina, and Klefki followed. "What do you think, Klefki?"

"I don't see anything," Alain said, peering through the gloom.

They had come to a fork in the road with two branching tunnels. Pangoro wanted to go left, but Klefki floated right.

"It's that way," Calem said. "That's where Serena is."

"Yeah, but Pangoro found something," Korrina said. "I think we should check it out."

"What's going on?" Grace said.

"It looks like we're at a crossroads," Alain said. "Klefki says right, but Pangoro wants to go left."

"Then we should follow Klefki," Grace said. "He knows how to find Serena."

"I know, but Pangoro's eyes don't lie in the dark. I think we should check out whatever he found just to be safe. We weren't exactly subtle getting in here," Korrina said.

"Korrina's right," Alain said. "We have to assume Laevus and Malva know we're here. Which is why I think you should take Wulfric with you."

"Wait, what?" Korrina said.

"I'm happy to go, but I don't want to get in the middle of a lover's quarrel. It's bad luck," Wulfric said.

"I don't think we should split up," Calem said.

"If we don't, whatever or whoever's down that way," Alain indicated the left passage, "could sneak up on us. I can't think of anyone better than two Gym Leaders to shut down whatever's waiting down there."

Wulfric thought about that. "That sounds fine to me, I suppose."

Korrina sighed, clearly displeased. "Alain, are you sure? Without Wulfric and me, you'll have a lot on your plate." She glanced at Calem.

"Yeah, I'm sure. Calem and I will be fine, and Grace can take care of herself, clearly."

"And Malva?"

"Malva's Alain's problem," Calem said. "We agreed. I'm not gonna fly off the handle and go after her again, so you don't have to worry about me."

Korrina looked abashed. "Sorry, Calem, but I had to ask."

"I'm here for Serena, that's it," Calem said.

"If we run into Malva, I'll handle her," Alain said.

"And if I do?" Korrina said.

"Then I trust you to kick her ass for me."

Grace peered down the right path, unsure. If Serena was that way, that was where she was going. But she did not like the idea of splitting up, not one bit.

"This is one large hideout," Wulfric said. "I'll bet these passages all meet up again someplace, or I'll eat my left boot."

"Okay," Korrina said. "For the record, I don't like this, but I don't want this Laevus guy surprising us from behind, either. Go, and when Wulfric and I deal with whatever's down there, we'll look for you."

Soon, Grace was following Calem and Alain down the right passage with Klefki, and Wulfric and Korrina had disappeared down the left passage. Without Wulfric, Grace felt more exposed, vulnerable, but she told herself she just had to deal with it. Serena was here, so close. Alain also seemed more on edge, though she could not imagine why when he had that monstrous Tyrantrum to back him up.

"How much farther, Calem?" Grace asked.

"I think we're getting close. Klefki?" he said.

Klefki jingled as he floated ahead, and Grace wondered if that was a yes. They came to a set of metal doors, far smaller than the ones blocking the entrance, and Calem tried them.

"Locked," Calem said, reaching for a Pokéball. "Stand back."

Grace and Alain watched with Heliolisk in between them as Calem released Bisharp. She was of a height with Calem and looked more like a weapon of torture than any Pokémon.

"Calem likes his knives, huh?" Alain whispered to her.

"Tear down that door, Bisharp," Calem said.

Bisharp flew at the door, a flurry of razors and blades, and ripped into it like a turkey dinner. The metal ripped and whined like it was nothing but cloth, and soon there was nothing but a pile of shredded metal and iron dust where the door had once stood. Calem didn't wait and stepped over the debris to continue forward.

"I like them, too," Grace said to Alain as she hastily went after Calem.

Alain chuckled and followed with Heliolisk. The passage Klefki led them down opened up into a wide cavern several stories tall. Grace was no learned woman of science, but to her layman's eyes it looked like they had stumbled into a subterranean laboratory replete with all manner of fancy equipment whose names she probably couldn't pronounce. There were computers and microscopes, tables littered with documents, and what looked like some sophisticated medical equipment that reminded her of a hospital. On the far end, more passages led to other rooms, though none of these were blocked by locked doors. Above, thick glass created a roof for the cavern that opened up to the outside world above. It had started to snow at some point since the group entered the mountain, and flurries covered the glass in an undulating blanket of white.

"Only three? Where's the rest of you lapdogs?"

A woman entered the lab with two Flare Agents flanking her regaled in their trademark red outfits and sunglasses despite the dim cavern lighting. Grace went pale as she recognized the woman. She would never forget that face, that voice.

"Malva," Calem spat, reaching for Aegislash strapped to his back. The Ghost sword was immediately awake and floating, sword and shield hovering over Calem and connected to him only by the tattered black ribbons.

Malva, dressed for the bitter winter weather in a white parka, tipped her tinted sunglasses and squinted at Calem. "You look familiar... Have

I tried to kill you before?"

Calem looked ready to return the favor, but Alain put his arm out to block Calem and positioned himself in between Malva and Calem.

"Malva," he said, approaching. Heliolisk hopped alongside him leaking static as she sensed a threat in Malva. "You're supposed to be dead."

Grace swallowed hard at the sight of a female Pyroar skulking around Malva and her guards. She looked hungry as she bared her teeth in a snarl.

"Wow," Malva said. "Alain, is that you? Now this is a surprise."

"Where's Serena?" Alain demanded.

"Is that what this is about?" Malva pulled out a small handful of Pokéballs from her jacket pocket and played with them in her slender hand. "Interesting... Does Lysandre know you're here? Or did he send you personally?"

Grace was having trouble following their conversation. What was this about Lysandre? Alain had said Malva and her brother Laevus had likely defected from Team Flare to pursue their own agenda here. And Alain himself had left Team Flare a long time ago. Didn't Malva know that?

Something's weird here.

"Oh no," Alain said, drawing out his remaining two Pokéballs. "I'm just here for you."

"Alain," Calem hissed.

"Go," Alain said. "Find Serena. I'll handle Malva."

"You'll *handle* me? Titan, you couldn't handle your own cock if it came with an instruction manual," Malva said. She nodded to her two Flare men, and they produced Pokéballs of their own and split up, intending to surround Grace's group.

Klefki and Bisharp boldly prepared to attack, the latter brandishing her bladed fists and the former jingling annoyingly. Aegislash remained eerily silent as her sharp blade reflected the light from the lamps hammered into the walls. Perhaps they remembered Malva and how she had killed their teammate, Escavalier, in their last encounter.

Grace sure as hell remembered, but she also remembered the plan they had discussed and discreetly laid a hand on Calem's shoulder.

"Let Alain fight Malva. We have to get to Serena," she whispered.

"I think that might be a little harder than we originally thought," Calem said as he watched the Flare Agents Malva had brought with her. They began to release their Pokémon to fight the intruders.

The Flare Agent to the left, a middle-aged man swaddled in red and white, had a Swoobat, a male Meowstic, and a Diggersby. Swoobat took off flying, while Meowstic remained close to his trainer. Diggersby, a bulky rabbit Pokémon with enormous ears that functioned like industrial shovels, slapped his ears on the rock floor and broke through. The other Flare Agent, a much younger man in the same red and white winter gear as his colleagues, had a Swalot that filled the room with a fetid stench like old wet garbage and infection, and an Exploud that looked emaciated under his leathery skin save for his huge head and gaping mouth. Grace knew little about these Pokémon, but from the way Calem and his Pokémon were tense, even the normally exuberant Klefki, she was in no hurry to find out.

"This is between you and me, Malva," Alain said, ignoring her jibe. "You kidnapped an innocent girl from her home in the middle of the night. I'm here to pay you back for that."

Malva was no longer in a joking mood, and Grace shuddered at the look in her pretty eyes. Such a pretty face, she thought, so young and strong with the world at her feet. Why, then? Why go through all this? Why use her power to hurt little girls?

"I always hated Titans," Malva said. "Such self-serving liars. You're not here for the Magus, you're here for your own ego. Serena could be dead right now, and you'd still only care about fighting me. That's all you've ever cared about. I know you, Alain."

"No," Grace blurted out. "No, you're lying. My daughter's alive, I know it."

Malva looked genuinely surprised to see Grace here. "Well... I guess you'll find out for yourself. Guillaume, Marcel, take care of Mom and Prince Not-So-Charming over there. I don't want any distractions."

Guillaume and Marcel, the two Flare Agents working with Malva, began their attack. It quickly became apparent that they had worked together before because they coordinated their Pokémon's attacks

without so much as a few words. Grace gasped and dug around her pockets for Fletchling's and Rhyhorns' Pokéballs.

But Calem was faster. Diggersby dug up the rocks he had crushed earlier with his ears and flung them at Calem, but Bisharp leaped into action, blades flying, and sliced right through them. But while Bisharp was distracted, Swalot belched out a Gunk Shot that went soaring clear across the cavern and separated into several smaller projectiles. A single drop of Swalot's poison could eat through flesh like acid, and Grace gasped.

It was Klefki that intervened without even a word of direction from Calem. The little Fairy shook his keys and conjured a mighty pink Crafty Shield that enveloped Grace and Calem like a bubble, and the Gunk Shot crashed against it and sloughed off the sides. Grace could hardly believe her eyes.

Heliolisk unleashed a Thunderbolt in the midst of the chaos, and Malva dashed out of the way. The Electric attack was drawn to a metal table and ricocheted off it to hit Exploud, but the dispersed attack was not enough to cripple him. The distraction was enough for Calem to release Staraptor, who took to the air with an angry squawk. Swoobat took off flying, afraid of the large raptor, and soon a vicious wind kicked up.

"You're not leaving here alive, Malva!" Alain shouted. "Not after what you've done!"

"We'll see about that," Malva said. "Noble Roar!"

Pyroar roared, but it was louder and fiercer than any roar Grace had ever heard, even from Serena's Rhydon. The sound hit her like lashes all over her body, crippling as it robbed her of coherent thought for a few seconds, and she fell to one knee. She lost track of the fight as she clutched her head, and the ground began to shake with the tremors of battle. When she looked up, Calem was fighting alongside his Pokémon and trying to get to Guillaume the Team Flare Agent, but Diggersby was throwing rocks, lab tables, and various scientific equipment at him. It was chaos, and Grace was caught right in the middle of it.

No, I have to find Serena. We can't waste time here!

"Calem!" she shouted, getting to her feet.

He moved fluidly and brought his sword hand down in a harsh arc.

Aegislash moved accordingly and sliced a table clean in half with Sacred Sword. He heard Grace's call and searched for her.

"Find Serena!" he shouted. "I'll cover you!"

Before Grace had a moment to answer, a column of fire blasted just inches away and nearly fried her to a crisp. She fell forward on instinct, breathing hard and trembling in fear. Sweat beaded on her forehead, and the sleeve of her jacket had caught fire. She rolled to smother the flames before they could eat through the material to her flesh, horrified at the damage they'd caused to her thick parka in just mere seconds. This was really happening, she realized. They were fighting all around her, and she was stuck in the middle. There was no standing by on the sidewalk this time while Calem did all the work. She was in this now, had started all this. And Serena was counting on her.

I won't let you down, Serena.

Grace pulled herself up and broke into a run. Klefki was floating around Calem and looking for an opening to attack without compromising him.

"Klefki!" Grace shouted.

Klefki looked around, startled, and floated toward her.

"Find Serena," she said. "Take me to her."

Klefki jingled frantically and looked back at Calem fighting with his Pokémon. Above, Staraptor squawked and dug her talons into the stone wall, cracking it and barely missing Swoobat as the smaller Flyer Teleported away just out of reach.

"Please, Klefki," Grace pleaded with the odd Pokémon. "Please, help me."

"Go, now!" Calem shouted back at Grace. He'd managed to land a hit on Diggersby with Aegislash's Iron Head. The fat rabbit had a gaping wound in his belly and was spilling entrails all over the place, but still he beat the ground with his mighty ears and sent dangerous tremors through the cavern. Cracks ran up the walls, spider-thin but growing. Guillaume retreated with his Meowstic, a creepy black cat-like Pokémon with unblinking eyes.

"Klefki!" Grace said.

Klefki seemed to have made a decision and zoomed off toward one of the exits where Malva had come from, and Grace had to run to keep up. But Guillaume saw what she was doing and tried to stop her.

"Psychic!" he commanded Meowstic.

Meowstic's vacuous eyes turned white, and rippling energy rose off him like heat. Air and light and space seemed to bend as the invisible wave of Psychic energy careened toward Grace as she dashed for the exit. Klefki saw what was happening and turned back to protect Grace, but he was too slow. Grace didn't even have time to scream as she saw her life flash before her eyes.

But the pain never came. Calem jumped with all his strength and landed hard on the ground a few feet from Grace. Aesiglash came down hard and tore into the eerie Psychic wave with shadowy talons that seemed to cut through the very air. They took on a life of their own and reached for Meowstic, and the cat screeched in terror and fled. But he was not fast enough. One of the Shadow Claw's talons ripped into Meowstic and dashed him against the wall as though possessed. A sickly white smoke rose from where the spectral talon ripped into Meowstic, though there was no physical laceration. Meowstic jerked unnaturally and began to foam at the mouth.

"Go!" Calem said.

Grace was too horrified at the near brush with death to question him or what had just happened—how had he cut through an invisible attack like that? Klefki jingled loudly, trying to get Grace's attention, and she remembered herself. Calem could take care of himself. He was strong, Grace knew that, and she'd promised him she would stay alive for Serena's sake.

So she ran out of the lab before something else could attack her, Klefki hot on her heels, and the two of them wandered deeper into the mountain hideout. The sounds of battle echoed behind her, terrible and blood-curdling, but Calem was strong. Alain was strong. They had come too far to fail now.

"Lead the way, Klefki," Grace said. "I'm right behind you."

Klefki floated along, following a path only he could see, and Grace trusted that he knew where he was going.

I'm coming, Serena. Just hold on.

Korrina and Wulfric walked in silence with Pangoro leading the way. Neither wanted to break the silence, for neither knew what lay ahead. The passage was deathly silent, and their footsteps echoed painfully loudly against the walls. Or maybe it was just Korrina's imagination. She was nervous, she realized. Without Alain here, she was nervous. She could fight just as well without him, but she'd never realized how comforting his mere presence was.

"So, Gurkinn tells me you're a natural at Mega Evolution," Wulfric said casually.

"You talk to Grandpa?" Korrina said, genuinely surprised.

"Here and there. We old folk tend to keep tabs on each other."

Korrina smiled. "I wouldn't say I'm a natural. I can do it, if that's what you mean."

Wulfric chuckled. "Well, either you can do it or you can't. Not many can. It takes a very special bond between the Tamer and her Pokémon."

"Lucario and I have been Mega Evolving for a few years now. Grandpa says I still have a lot to learn," Korrina admitted.

"Good, good. The best thing you can do as a young person is recognize that there's always more to learn. You got years to do it. But me, I'm stuck with the way things are, and if they're not good, then I'm about as out o' luck as a gambler with two left feet."

Korrina made a face. "Wait, what? That doesn't make any sense."

"You know, a gambler with two left feet. He's got no money *and* he can't dance. If it was just one or the other, it wouldn't be half so unlucky, I tell you," Wulfric said.

Korrina bit back a laugh. "Sure, if you say so."

Pangoro growled suddenly, and Korrina froze. Wulfric, too, fell still and strained to listen.

"What is it, Pangoro?" Korrina whispered.

Pangoro lumbered on all fours, but his progress was slower and more cautious as he came upon whatever it was that had drawn his attention back at the fork. Korrina swallowed hard but bravely

followed, a hand on Lucario's Pokéball and trying to mentally prepare herself for whatever, or whoever, was waiting up ahead.

What they found was another set of iron doors, but these were flung wide open. Someone had passed through here already. Wulfric sniffled.

"You smell that?" he said.

She did smell it. Sour and wet and coppery. It was coming from just beyond the doors. Korrina nodded and led Pangoro and Wulfric through the doors. What she found confirmed her suspicions. Dead bodies, both people and Pokémon, littered the cavern floor deeper into the passage. The last one she could see was a man flat on his stomach, but only his legs were visible around the bend in the passage. Korrina stepped gingerly over a Lickitung's corpse and bent down to examine it.

"It looks like he was torn apart," she said, observing the damage to the Pokémon's back. "Those are deep holes. Maybe horns."

Pangoro sniffed at a dead Furfrou and nudged the body with his nose, but the dog did not move.

Wulfric was more interested in the human bodies, and he squatted down next to the closest one. It was a woman dressed all in red. She had sunglasses on, but one lens was cracked and exposed her eye, frozen open and glazed with death.

"Whatever got them didn't care about making a mess," Korrina said.

"Hey, you said these guys were Team Flare, right?" Wulfric said as he studied the woman's body. "Why would they turn on their own?"

Korrina thought about that. "No, Alain said Malva and her brother Laevus probably defected from Team Flare. Sycamore said so, too."

"Then, did they keep the uniforms're something? Why is Team Flare here if those two called it quits? And look there." Wulfric pointed to the next body over. "They're all facing this way. Like they were trying to get out."

Korrina looked down the passageway and counted eleven human bodies. "That's a very good question."

Some noise was coming from up ahead around the corner, but Korrina

couldn't make out what it was. She got up and walked closer, straining to listen, when she heard a scream followed by a dull thud. She froze in place, but there was no further screaming. Without hesitation, Korrina released Lucario. The jackal bared his teeth at the foul stench in the narrow corridor, and Pangoro rose on his hind legs at Lucario's sudden appearance. Wulfric joined her.

"Did you hear that?" Korrina whispered.

"Yes. I think it's time we go and meet this Team Flare gang," Wulfric said, tossing out a Pokéball of his own.

Abomasnow materialized in the flash of light, as tall as Pangoro and just as thick around. The temperature in the passageway dropped noticeably, and Korrina shivered. Abomasnow hissed, beak snapping, as he eyed Pangoro and Lucario, but Wulfric laid a hand on his lichen-encrusted belly, a silent reassurance.

"Well, I'm sure not getting any younger." Wulfric headed toward the bend in the passageway with Abomasnow, and Korrina had no choice but to follow.

When they came around the corner, the passage opened up into a larger room. There was a kitchen and a large dinner table in the center of the room, and an old TV with an adjustable antenna sat on a small stool in the corner in front of a folding chair. The man whose legs had been visible before turning the corner ended at the waist. His upper body had been ripped off, and intestines spilled onto the cavern floor freezing in congealed blood and shit. The rest of him was on the other side of the cavern bleeding out in the kitchen. The scream Korrina had heard had been a woman's, and she was currently suspended in midair in the clutches of a nightmarish Bug Korrina had only seen in pictures.

"Oh my god," Korrina said.

Mega Pinsir, having gained the ability to Fly upon Mega Evolving, hovered overhead with the Team Flare Agent caught between his massive pincers at the neck. From the way she was jerking erratically, her air supply was nearly cut off. Mega Pinsir snapped his pincers and popped off her head like a bottle cap, and her body fell to the floor with a wet smack. Her head rolled to a stop at Wulfric's feet, face frozen in a silent scream and bleeding all over Wulfric's fur-lined boots.

"What's this? More of you?" said an obese man wrapped up in a red

and white parka bursting at the seams. He looked like an overstuffed sausage straining against its filmy packaging, and his beady eyes were narrow and suspicious. His balding head was sweaty, though the temperature in this room was well below comfortable.

He had a team of people with him, Team Flare Agents from the looks of them. A few had blood spatters on their jackets. Korrina suddenly understood what was going on. These had to be the defectors that had come with Malva and Laevus. The dead were dressed differently from them. So Team Flare had beaten her group here in pursuit of their betrayers, and from the looks of it, they had not succeeded in quelling the rebellion.

Mega Pinsir's buzzing was a loud droning, the sound Korrina had heard back in the cavern passage. He floated to the ground in between the fat man and Korrina and Wulfric.

"Are you Laevus?" Korrina demanded. Lucario growled next to her.

The fat man did not look pleased by her question. "I'll be asking the questions here. You don't look like Team Flare. Who are you?"

That has to be him, Korrina thought. *But why does he have a Mega Pokémon?*

She remembered what Sycamore had hypothesized, that perhaps Laevus had been studying a way for non-Tamers to use Mega Evolution, and all the blood drained from her face.

It couldn't be...

"Hello there," Wulfric said almost amiably. "Laevus, was it? Well, I'm Wulfric, Gym Leader of Snowbelle City, and I'm here looking for someone. Perhaps you've seen her?"

Laevus sputtered. "A Gym Leader? How did you find this place? What do you want?"

"Oh, well, I was just getting to that," Wulfric said with a smile. "I'm here looking for Serena. She's a nice girl, 'bout yea high." He cast a glance at Korrina and settled his hand at her shoulder, thought better of it, raised it a little higher, then sighed and let his hand drop. "Gosh, you know what, honestly, I'm not all that sure how tall she is. But I do know she's here somewhere, and she sure doesn't want to be. You know anything about that?"

Laevus looked at him like he'd sprouted antlers. "The Magus?" His double chins wriggled like fat maggots squirming under his skin. "She's *mine*. You can't have her, you...you *thieves*! You're here to steal my research, aren't you?!"

Korrina had heard enough. "It's over, Laevus. I'm Gym Leader Korrina of Shalour City. I see you have some goons here to do your dirty work for you, but it won't work against two Gym Leaders. Surrender peacefully, and we won't kill you."

Laevus gaped at her in shock. "How dare you speak to me like that! If Lysandre thinks he can send his little whores to do his dirty work, he's got another thing coming. Mega Pinsir! Show these two your power!"

Laevus raised his arm, and Mega Pinsir hissed in response. He lifted off the ground, a truly terrifying sight, and the barbed pincers on his head began to spin. The Flare Agents around Laevus looked to him for guidance.

"Sir, what should we do?" one of the men asked.

"Make sure the Magus is secure, you cretins!" Laevus said, spilling spittle on his chin. "Now!"

Two of the three ran off to do just that, and the other one remained ready to back up Laevus. He had a Pokémon of his own, a Gumshoos with frighteningly disproportionate jaws. Korrina was not in the mood for this bullshit.

"You're a skuff, right?" Korrina said. "How about I show you what a *real* Mega Evolved Pokémon can do?"

Laevus sputtered in fury at Korrina's blatant disrespect. "Attack! Kill her now!"

Korrina pulled up the sleeve of her jacket and sliced a thin cut into her palm with the tiny razor hidden in her sweatband. She quickly touched her bleeding hand to Lucario's back, and Lucario transformed. Taller, fiercer, and a hell of a lot stronger, Mega Lucario leaped into the air on powerful hind legs at Mega Pinsir, paws glowing as he conjured an Aura Sphere. The two Mega Pokémon collided in a brilliant explosion of light from Lucario's attack, the sound deafening. The battle began.

10. Chapter 10

Wanderer
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon
Notes: This is a long-ass chapter even for me, but I found that the fights needed to be in one place to preserve the chaotic and stressful atmosphere I want to convey. I've heard that long chapters bother some people (?), but I strongly felt that splitting this in two would disrupt the flow too much. So I guess...sorry for giving you so much story content? There are plenty of POV shifts to make it easy to take breaks if you want to do that, but I encourage you to read it all in one go to get the most out of it. Anyway, I hope you enjoy the events of this final chapter before the epilogue, woo!

Malva's Pyroar was fast and strong. Her Flamethrowers were devastating in reach and power, and even the slippery Heliolisk was having trouble dodging her attacks. The small pseudo-Dragon had already sustained a boiling burn on her haunches that slowed her down, but Heliolisk was full of energy and indignation as she zipped about the cavernous laboratory, collar flared, and fired off Thunderbolts and Dragon Pulses in rapid-fire succession.

Nearby, Calem was in the midst of his own battle against Malva's underlings and their motley team of Pokémon. Alain was too busy running around avoiding Pyroar's relentless Fire attacks to pay him much mind, but from what he could tell, Calem had managed to take out one of the two Flare Agents with Bisharp's help. Alain only caught a glimpse of Calem wielding Aegislash like a puppet on strings, slashing through Meowstic's rippling Psychics, while Bisharp attacked from behind and Night Slashed the Flare Agent's back, butterflying him like a fish fillet.

A blast of fire caught Alain in the leg, and he dove and rolled, afraid of the searing heat. His snow pants now had a hole in them and smoked, but luckily his skin had been spared contact with the flames this time. On his hands and knees, he looked around for Heliolisk, who was actively running down Pyroar, hissing and spitting and sparking in vengeance for the cheap shot.

Alain was about to get up as he reached for his remaining Pokéballs when he saw strange movement out of the corner of his eye. Calem's Staraptor was wearing down a Swoobat with her superior stamina and size, but Swoobat was fast and right at home in the enclosed cavern, able to swerve and change trajectory more efficiently and accurately

than Staraptor. He was emitting some kind of invisible waves from his nose that hit the walls and cut cracks in the stone that creeped along the cavern in all directions. One crack opened like a smiling mouth against the glass ceiling above.

What the hell?

"If you're going to fight me, then fight me!" Malva shouted, brandishing another Pokéball at Alain.

He couldn't call Tyrantrum in here unless he wanted to decimate the cavern with Calem and him still inside, and Charizard couldn't fly in here. If Malva released more Pokémon in here, he'd be in major trouble.

"Calem!" he shouted. "Get out of here!"

Calem looked around when called, and the Swalot he'd been fighting took advantage of the distraction to lob a Gunk Shot at him directly. Aegislash's shield moved with a mind of its own and spun Calem around to block, but a glob of poison hit Calem on the thigh with a hiss. Alain paled at the sight. Swalot sludge burned as hotly as any fire and could corrode skin and stone alike. Calem's pants smoked as the acid rotted a hole in them in seconds, but unbelievably, he was still moving like he'd been splashed with hot water instead of deadly sludge.

"Metal Burst!" Calem shouted.

Bisharp, her bladed fists slick with the dead Flare Agent's blood, leaped high into the air and burst with silver light that momentarily blinded Alain and everyone else in the cavern. Only the crack of steel on stone could be heard as the light dissipated as suddenly as it had appeared. Swalot—what remained of him—was reduced to a boiling black puddle full of metal shards steadily seeping through the cracks in the floor.

"The fuck..." Alain rubbed his eyes as his vision readjusted to the dim cavern and his heart leaped into his throat as he remembered Malva.

"Enough of this," Malva spat. "If you won't get serious, then I will."

A man's scream filled the cavern. The other Flare Agent Malva had brought along was wounded—some of Swalot's sludge had splashed his shoulder and hip, and he was attempting to make a break for it.

Meanwhile, Staraptor's Brave Bird collided with the cavern wall, drawing a huge crater in the stone, but even the elusive Swoobat could not get out of the way in time to avoid the reckless attack. Swoobat's wing got caught up in the attack, and the bat shrieked in pain as his wing ripped off and he fell to the ground, unable to fly. Staraptor, her huge talons embedded in the stone, fluffed her feathers and shook off the recoil damage she had taken without issue. She cocked her head and searched for Calem below with a piercing squawk.

But Alain was more concerned with Malva and the Charizard she had just released. Pyroar was worn down, her creamy hide charred black in places from Heliolisk's lightning attacks and dripping blood on the ground. Her muzzle was red with bloody lather, and she was limping. Heliolisk was in similar shape, her burns having slowed her down considerably. She limped to Alain's side, still hissing and spitting but unwilling to face Malva's Charizard.

"Look, we match," Malva said as she moved to stand safely behind her Charizard.

He was a large specimen and practically salivating for a taste of battle. Charizard were known to be violent in the wild, reveling in a chance to shed blood both for food and for sport. Even under the care of a skilled trainer, Charizard could be obstinate and even disobedient. Malva's Charizard didn't look like he wanted to disobey her when the thrill of the hunt was in sight. Alain reached for his own Charizard's Pokéball.

What choice do I have?

If he was limited in this cavern, then Malva would be, too. Calem had been pursuing the fleeing Flare Agent when Malva released her Charizard, and he stopped now.

"Alain," he said, the warning clear in his tone as he brandished Aegislash.

"Get out of here, Calem," Alain said, releasing his own Charizard.

The huge orange lizard landed with a thud in front of Alain and Heliolisk. Where Malva's Charizard was snarling to taste blood, Alain's Charizard had always been rather phlegmatic for his kind. In the presence of the opposing Charizard, however, he sensed a primal threat and poised to charge, head low and jaws smoking.

The sound of stone cracking had been easy to ignore before, but now it was deafening in the acoustic space. The cavern was slowly collapsing, crack by crack, thanks to Swoobat's efforts. The glass above had begun to fracture as the walls holding it up began to crumble.

"But the cave," Calem protested as Staraptor and Bisharp landed beside him.

"Just go!" Alain shouted.

Calem decided that he ought to listen for once in his life, recalled Staraptor and Bisharp, and took off toward the exit where Grace had disappeared earlier. Heliolisk hissed as she noticed the cave starting to lose its stability all around them. Anything could set it off. All it would take was one well-placed Thunderbolt or Flamethrower, and the whole structure could collapse in on itself, burying Alain and Malva and their Pokémon with it.

"Ever played chicken?" Malva taunted as she twirled a knife in her hand.

Before Alain could respond, she sliced open her hand, touched her bloody palm to Charizard's flank, and initiated a Mega Evolution. Her Charizard began to transform, and even as he saw it, he couldn't quite believe it.

Malva's Charizard grew a couple feet in height, and a wicked horn crowned his head. Everything about him became sharper, more magnificent, but by appearances he hadn't much changed at all. He was still that same sunburst orange, blue wings and all. But the air in the cavern suddenly became stiflingly hot, thick with heat as though every breath was liquid fire. Alain felt drunk just breathing the torrid air in here, and his knees began to wobble.

"Mega Charizard," Malva commanded, her palm dripping blood that evaporated before it ever hit the ground. She pointed a finger at Alain. "Blast Burn."

Malva's Mega Charizard began to smoke at the jaws. The smoke filled the already asphyxiating atmosphere with the acrid stench of sulfur as Mega Charizard conjured heat in the pit of his belly. Alain was speechless with incredulity. If that Mega Charizard set off a Blast Burn in here, it would incinerate everyone and everything in here.

No, he thought in horror, remembering that open flame Malva held close over her mortal wounds the last time they had fought. *No, the*

fire can't kill her, only me.

He thrust a hand at Malva's Mega Charizard and channeled all the strength he had into controlling it.

"Stop!" he commanded the beast.

But Mega Charizard did not stop, deaf to his commands and oblivious to his control. There was no reaching him. But Dragons and their descendants were not supposed to be able to defy a fully-realized Titan. Unless...

He's not a Dragon, not anymore. She burned the Dragon's blood right out of him!

Whatever this Mega Evolution was, it had transformed Malva's Charizard into a creature born of fire, and he was beyond Alain's control. Mega Charizard's brilliant orange scales were beginning to glow with power as flames slowly licked at them, superheating the air around him. Alain scrambled with the sleeve of his heavy jacket that now felt like a wearable furnace in this heat. Sweat stung his eyes, and his hair was already heavy and damp in the scorching heat. He was lightheaded, and if he didn't know better, he would have wondered if his brain was boiling in his skull.

Under the sleeve of his jacket there was a sweatband with a small razor concealed in the folds, courtesy of Korrina. Alain hastily slashed his hand across it, but in his sloppy stupor he tore his fingers to ribbons. No matter, he just had to get to Charizard. Heliolisk was shrieking in distress at the hostile temperatures permeating the cavern, but all Alain could think of was getting to Charizard. He threw himself at Charizard's back and dragged his bleeding fingers over his scales while fumbling for Heliolisk's Pokéball with his free hand to recall her. Orange bled to black, but he was seeing double now. Was this what hell was like? Some people believed that sinners were doomed to spend eternity in an inferno for their transgressions. Alain could not imagine any sin so terrible as to merit even five minutes of this demonic heat.

"F-Fly!" he stammered, barely cognizant of his own body as he threw his arms and legs around the body underneath him.

The world moved, jostling him around, and impossibly it got even hotter. All he could see through the haze was brilliant orange, pennons of fire that swallowed the stone and the lab equipment and Malva herself. They swallowed Alain, too, and the scream along with

him.

Korrina felt Lucario's impact with Mega Pinsir as if she'd collided with the Bug herself, and it knocked the wind out of her. Aura Sphere buffeted the huge Bug back and sent him crashing into the kitchen table, but Mega Pinsir's carapace was as hard as iron and would not break easily. This was no ordinary Bug.

How the fuck is a skuff doing this?!

Korrina was no scientist and honestly, right now she didn't exactly give a damn when there were more important things to worry about, like killing that Mega Pinsir before he could kill Lucario and her. Pangoro stomped the ground angrily, ready to fight, too, and Wulfric Mega Evolved his Abomasnow into an even bigger and meaner-looking owl bear *thing* that made even Pangoro wary. The temperature in the cavern plummeted upon Abomasnow's Mega Evolution, and frost began to form and creep along the stone walls and furniture. The TV screen cracked under the cold, and Korrina felt her ears pop.

"You're outnumbered, Laevus. This is your final warning," Wulfric said magnanimously. "Now, Korrina and I here got two Mega Pokémon, and between you and me, that's two more than you're going to want to deal with today. Why don't you just stop all this so nobody else has to get hurt?"

"Shut up!" Laevus shouted. "I will not be patronized by the likes of you!"

"Give it up, Wulric," Korrina said. "This guy's asking for it, and I'm ready to let him have it."

"You Tamers think you're so special because of your powers. But what's so special about just being born?" Laevus went on. "You're not special, you're freaks!"

"Oh, yeah? Well, this freak's gonna break your ass." Korrina took off running directly at Laevus, but Mega Pinsir had recovered from Lucario's earlier attack and descended in a frightening cacophony of buzzing wings and spinning pincers ready to cleave. Korrina gasped and was forced to lunge to the side to avoid instant death by Guillotine, just barely. Mega Abomasnow came to the rescue with an Ice Punch that caught Mega Pinsir in one of his spinning pincers and knocked him away, but even that wasn't enough to deter the powerful Bug. Covered in frost, Mega Pinsir spun his huge tusks and shook

himself out, ready to go again.

Laevus was absolutely furious at what had nearly been a direct hit on him personally. "How dare you! You think you're so much stronger and better than me just because you were born a Tamer? Well, guess what? *You're* the rejects, not me. Skuffs and plebs vastly outnumber Tamers the world over! I don't care if you can punch hard or freeze things! The only reason you're allowed to live is because you keep everybody afraid, afraid of what you'll do to them if they defy you. You're all the same, scaring me and threatening me and burning me whenever I so much as look at you wrong!"

Korrina got to her feet. Wulfric and Abomasnow were close, but Mega Pinsir was between Mega Lucario and her. The other Flare Agent and his Gumshoos had not moved yet, but Korrina did not like the pair of chompers on that Pokémon. One bite from a Gumshoos could grind human bones to dust. Laevus had worked himself into some kind of frenzy in his tirade as he shook his sausage hands at Korrina and Wulfric, like they might understand him better if he moved.

"But get you in a corner, and you're just the same as me," Laevus said. "Just a sack of meat nobody'll miss when you're gone."

"Those're some harsh words," Wulfric said. "You don't even know us. And if I remember right, we're here to stop the bad guy. From where I'm standing, that's you, I'm sorry to say."

"I said *shut up*!" Spittle flew from Laevus's wet pink lips as he shook with anger. "I know you! You're all the same, just like that slut sister of mine. You think you're so special, but there's nothing special about you anymore. Now, I can do what you can do, and I'm gonna make sure every last Tamer knows it. I'm going to change the world!"

"Like I said," Korrina said, one eye on Mega Lucario, "you haven't seen what a real Mega Pokémon can do. Whatever science fiction you're playing at here will never make you anything more than the murderer and kidnapper you are."

Laevus was positively seething. He dug around in his pockets for something—two more Pokéballs clenched in between his meaty fists. "A real Mega Pokémon?" he said. "I'll do you one better!"

He tossed the Pokéballs, and Korrina was for the second time left speechless. After the flashes of light died down, Korrina and Wulfric found themselves facing not only Mega Pinsir, but also Mega Aggron and Mega Gallade, all surrounding Laevus like knights protecting their

sovereign. Mega Aggron was a fortress of iron, a gargoyle given life. Nearly fifteen feet tall, he towered high above even Mega Abomasnow and gleamed in the fluorescent lighting. Mega Gallade was emaciated and small next to his companion, and tattered capes draped his bony shoulders like a true knight's mantle. But the wicked blades that extended from his arms were frightening to behold, wicked ruby red as though he had been slaughtering foes before appearing here and had not bothered to wash himself clean. Mega Pinsir hovered over them on those infernal buzzing wings, the sound of which now made Korrina's skin crawl.

"Impossible," Korrina said. "Three Mega Pokémon?"

Wulfric was uncharacteristically silent as he observed the three Mega Pokémon before him. Those piercing blue eyes reflected nothing in their depths, and Korrina was reminded of the day she and the others had first confronted him in his Gym, his immutable and eerie presence that was so out of place with his normally good-humored and simple personality. Wulfric's deathly seriousness now scared her more even than the unimaginable odds of confronting three Mega Pokémon all at once. He was afraid, too.

"Korrina," Wulfric said. "I'll take Mega Aggron. You focus on Mega Pinsir."

"What? But you have a type disadvantage," Korrina protested, hating the way her voice shook.

"That monster'll crush Mega Lucario in one fist. Can Pangoro distract that Mega Gallade?"

Korrina felt numb, and not because of the cold Mega Abomasnow exuded. Laevus was clutching at his limp left arm and breathing heavily, but he was also smiling.

"What's the matter?" Laevus taunted, out of breath all of a sudden for no apparent reason. "You're Gym Leaders, aren't you? A mere skuff like me should be no problem for you."

"What have you done?" Korrina said, unable to keep the quaver out of her voice.

Laevus heard it and laughed. "I've evened the playing field! Now, have a taste of *three* real Mega Pokémon!"

He lifted the hand he'd been cradling with visible difficulty, and the

three Mega monsters attacked. Korrina barely had time to think when Mega Gallade lunged lightning fast and cleaved the ground where she'd been standing just a split second ago. If not for her naturally fast reflexes, Korrina would have lost more than the end of her ponytail to Mega Gallade's blades.

Mega Lucario yipped and leaped to her aid, while Pangoro barreled through the cavern intending to Hammer Arm anything that got in his way. Wulfric was busy with Mega Abomasnow and commanded him to Wood Hammer a slowly charging Mega Aggron. The two behemoths collided with an earth-shattering crash, but neither fell.

Three Mega Pokémon, Korrina thought as she ran. *This can't be happening!*

But it was happening all around her. Whatever Laevus had been working on had clearly borne fruit as he commanded three Mega Pokémon all at once. A Tamer could only Mega Evolve a single Pokémon at a time, and then only a Pokémon with the same nature affinity. Mega Gallade, Mega Aggron, and Mega Pinsir were all as different as night and day. None of it made any sense at all, and yet it was *happening*.

"Metal Claw!" Korrina shouted.

Mega Lucario crashed into Mega Pinsir and managed to climb onto the Bug's back, where he began to slash at Mega Pinsir's carapace with Metal Claw. Mega Pinsir screeched in pain and began to buzz around the room erratically, trying to shake off his assailant. Pangoro was doing his best to land a hit on the agile Mega Gallade, but so far the smaller Fighter was doing an excellent job of dodging, attacking, and dodging again. Pangoro was bleeding from several gashes in his belly and flanks where Mega Gallade had Slashed him savagely. Korrina swore and tossed out Blaziken's Pokéball.

"Help Pangoro!" she commanded her Pokémon.

Blaziken quickly assessed the situation and leaped high to Blaze Kick Mega Gallade, but again the Mega Fighter was incredibly agile. Facing two Fighters, however, Mega Gallade was now on the defensive and wary of Blaziken's fiery kicks and punches.

Mega Lucario was still clinging to Mega Pinsir's back as the Bug raced around the cavern in a desperate attempt to shake him off. Korrina looked for Laevus. If she could take him out, then his Mega Pokémon would go down, too. Mega Evolution was a double-edged sword, and

there was no reason it wouldn't be the same for Laevus. If she could just get by Mega Aggron, she might have a shot.

But all of a sudden, Gumshoos and his Flare Agent trainer attacked her directly. The Stakeout Pokémon Tackled her hard and sent them both crashing into the kitchen counter. His jaw was glowing white as he tried to Hyper Fang Korrina's arm, but she reacted fast and kicked the Pokémon as hard as she could in the side. Gumshoos fell and Korrina rolled, seeing double. She'd hit her head pretty hard against the stainless steel counter, and her vision swam. Something heavy fell to the ground not far away, and Korrina realized with dread that it was Mega Lucario. He had felt her pain and lost his focus long enough for Mega Pinsir to throw him off.

Furious, Korrina lunged at Gumshoos and punched him with everything she had. The overgrown mongoose writhed in pain where she had broken his ribs, but she punched him again and again and again until she heard a satisfying crack that made him go limp. Her head was pounding and her back ached like someone had taken a sledgehammer to it, but Gumshoos was no longer a threat. The Flare Agent that had trained him came at her with a metal beater stick, and Korrina had barely enough time to get to her feet and get out of the way.

Mega Pinsir, bleeding from Mega Lucario's vicious attack earlier, nevertheless went after Mega Lucario with a vengeance now. An X-Scissor would have ripped Mega Lucario's belly open if not for his quick block with his paws. Mega Pinsir's brutal tusks ripped into Mega Lucario's forearms, but Mega Lucario's steel-plated bones kept the damage shallow and superficial. Korrina, however, felt it bone-deep.

"Ahh!" she cried out as she staggered to avoid the Flare Agent's relentless assault. Her arms were on fire and wet with blood where they'd been slashed up as though by magic. The weight of the wet blood was making her jacket heavy, but there was no time and this jackass was coming after her with his beater stick like he had a horror movie fantasy.

"Die!" he shouted behind his stupid red sunglasses.

Korrina clenched her jaw and grabbed the beater stick with her hands mid-swing. Her vision flashed white with agony, but she fought through it; she'd felt worse. She swung around with her leg and toppled the guy before he knew what hit him and wrenched the beater stick from his hands. He was on his back with the wind knocked out of

him and barely had time to blink before Korrina brought her foot down on his face with all her might. His skull crunched under her boot. He was dead instantly. The beater stick clattered to the ground.

"You first," she spat.

Nearby, Mega Abomasnow was bleeding from his belly where Mega Aggron had gutted him, but the cut must not have been too bad because the abominable Pokémon was still pummeling Mega Aggron with everything he had. The chill in the room was becoming almost unbearable as Mega Abomasnow unleashed a concentrated Ice Beam attack that hit Mega Aggron square in his plated chest and threw the behemoth off balance. Frost bloomed over Mega Aggron's armored hide and froze him in place. Mega Aggron roared, a nightmarish sound from another dimension that could have probably been heard clear across the White Mountains, and incredibly broke free of the ice with brute strength.

"That's it! Crush them!" Laevus shouted.

Korrina spotted him farther away than he'd been before safe from the worst of the fighting and could not quite understand what she was seeing. He was panting and having trouble standing as he leaned on a table for support, but he was standing all the same. And then it hit her.

"He doesn't feel their pain," she said, hardly believing her own words. "But *how*?"

Impossible, she thought yet again.

The ability to command Mega Pokémon without the drawback of sharing pain was unimaginable. It would be a power far beyond anything even a Tamer could accomplish. Korrina could not believe it, and yet it was happening.

Pangoro and Blaziken were still fending off Mega Gallade, but Pangoro had slowed down considerably due to his injuries. A beefy Pokémon capable of smashing through stone and iron alike, Pangoro's stout and imposing stature was also his weakness. Against a foe like Mega Gallade, he would face death by a thousand cuts without ever getting a hit in edgewise. Blaziken was faring better as he focused on keeping Mega Gallade on the defensive, but Mega Gallade's Psycho Cuts spooked the Fighter parrot and kept his fire at bay. If Pangoro were to go down, Mega Gallade would have no qualms about rushing Blaziken with everything he had without having to worry about the

big panda waiting to pummel him when his back was turned.

"Damnit," Korrina said.

Wulfric was favoring his left side, the same place Mega Abomasnow's injuries had afflicted him. If Laevus truly was impervious to his Mega Pokémon's pain, then this battle would be over far sooner than it should be, and not in Korrina and Wulfric's favor. They had to do something.

Mega Pinsir screeched all of a sudden, and Korrina whirled around just in time to see a blurry Mega Lucario slam into him with full-body Extreme Speed. Mega Pinsir went flying and crashed into the same kitchen counter Korrina had crashed into before.

There was a terrifying crack behind Korrina, and she turned just in time to see Mega Abomasnow hit the wall courtesy of Mega Aggron's tail. The Stone Edge attack was not strong enough to take Mega Abomasnow out of the game, but Wulfric went to one knee as he clutched his ribs and breathed heavily. Unguarded, he was in Mega Aggron's sights, and the Steel behemoth advanced on tree-trunk feet ready to smash him underfoot. Mega Abomasnow scrambled to get to Wulfric, but he was slow and hurting.

"Wulfric!" Korrina screamed.

She ran, shedding her bloody jacket as she went to lose the weight, uncaring that her arms were in pain and still bleeding. She had to get him out of the way. He was heavy when she slung his arm around her shoulder, and it took every ounce of strength she had in her to move him just as Mega Aggron came crashing by with an Iron Head attack aimed for Wulfric. Korrina barely made it in time, and Mega Aggron's polished hide grazed her roughly as she got out of the way, sending her falling down on her rear. He plowed on by and crashed into the wall, injuring only himself in the process. Mega Abomasnow unleashed another hellish Ice Beam on his back and froze him solid against the wall under several inches of pure ice.

"Goodness," Wulfric said, wincing. "You've got some good timing, Korrina."

"Another one? Agh! Mega Gallade, kill him!" Laevus said.

Korrina and Wulfric were stunned to see Calem, of all people, suddenly here and intervening in Pangoro and Blaziken's fight against Mega Gallade. Where he'd come from, Korrina had no idea. But he and

Aegislash were suddenly embroiled in a duel of swords with Mega Gallade and matching him blow for blow.

"Calem!" Korrina said.

Aegislash glowed and hit Mega Gallade with a Shadow Claw that Mega Gallade miraculously survived by parrying with Psycho Cut. A bone-chilling scream, like a dying animal's last cry, echoed through the room as Psychic and spectral energy collided and buffeted them both back. Calem's dark eyes, wide with adrenaline, found Korrina's.

"What the hell is going on here?!" he shouted.

Damn, but she was glad to see him. Pangoro limped toward Korrina, and Blaziken slowly extricated himself from Calem's fight with Mega Gallade, though reluctantly. With Calem here, maybe Korrina could get to Laevus himself now.

Korrina was about to respond to Calem when Laevus screamed, "Enough! Kill it, Mega Pinsir!"

It happened so fast that Korrina hardly realized what had happened, what she'd done. One moment Mega Lucario was dealing the finishing blow to Mega Pinsir, and the next Mega Pinsir found some remaining strength somewhere and caught Mega Lucario's arm and torso in between his spiked tusks. Korrina felt the squeeze on her own body as Mega Pinsir's Guillotine began to crush Mega Lucario. Even Steel-plated bones could not defend against such a merciless attack. At some point, she must have let go of Wulfric and gotten up to run toward Mega Lucario, and each step was agony in her chest as she felt her bones bend under the invisible Guillotine crushing her as it was crushing Mega Lucario. Mega Lucario yelped in pain and convulsed as Mega Pinsir squeezed. It was so cold in here.

"No!" Korrina screamed.

But death never came, and the pain was soon abating with every step she took to reach Mega Lucario. Except he wasn't Mega Lucario anymore, just Lucario, and Mega Pinsir was still crushing him. Lucario, now reverted to his normal state, bent his head back in agony and let out a shrill bleating sound before Mega Pinsir's Guillotine snapped his spine in two. Tears filled Korrina's eyes, and she lost her balance on the uneven rocky floor. She fell and landed on her injured arms, the agony blinding. But she could breathe again, and her chest wasn't crushed. Her spine was not snapped. She was alive, but Lucario... Lucario was...

Mega Pinsir lay dying, his belly opened where Mega Lucario had ripped him apart piece by piece. Lucario's broken body slipped from between his crushing pincers like a ragdoll, just a heap of fur and meat, and crumpled to the ground, dusty and dirty. Korrina struggled to her feet, ignored the pain in her aggravated arms, and staggered toward Lucario. His tongue lolled in his mouth, which was bloody and missing a few teeth. he was so small in her arms, smaller than she remembered, and his body bent at an unnatural angle. Blood matted his paws where he shared her injuries.

Korrina's hands shook as she cradled her Pokémon. "Lucario," she said, almost a question.

Calem and Mega Gallade's storm of swords raged in the background, clinking and clanging.

Korrina shuddered. "Lucario," she said again. "Why...?"

Why am I still alive?

Korrina had always known she would not die alone. It would be fighting alongside Mega Lucario, and they would go together. With the great power of Mega Evolution came a high personal cost of shared pain. But to share pain was to grow together, as she had done with Lucario after her father's death. Whatever Lucario felt, she felt. Together, they overcame her fears and her weakness, and together they became stronger. Together, they would die, a union of souls that could transcend any other bond.

But she was still here.

Korrina shook with grief and anger. "Why?" she demanded as her tears fell and matted Lucario's fur. "*Why*?"

Why did she let go? Why did Lucario? Had it been one of them, or both? One moment, they were tethered together in the bond that enabled Mega Evolution, and the next it was severed, just gone. Had she withdrawn? Had she let Lucario die alone? Or had Lucario withdrawn from her? Did it really matter now that Lucario was gone?

"Oh my god," Korrina sobbed as all the strength left her body and she felt like a little girl again cowering in fear from her father's abusive wrath. "Please, no..."

Pangoro and Blaziken joined her, the former worse for wear while the latter remained very alert to the battle that continued all around.

Mega Aggron had managed to pry himself free from his ice prison against the wall, but he was hobbled badly after the beating Mega Abomasnow had dealt him and moving sluggishly, his joints still frozen in places. Calem and Aegislash moved as one, elegantly parrying Mega Gallade's fast slashes and jabs in a way that was almost beautiful to behold.

"Korrina!" Wulfric said, back on his feet but clutching his side.

"Just die already!" Laevus shouted, having noticed Mega Pinsir's demise and Mega Aggron's deterioration. He was nervously watching Calem fight Mega Gallade and sweating even more profusely, if that was possible. Why was he so hot in this freezing cold cavern?

"Sir! We've secured the Magus!" said one of the Flare Agents who had been with Laevus here when Korrina arrived.

Laevus blustered. "About time! Well, what are you waiting for? Let's go!"

The two Flare Agents that had returned led Laevus back the way they'd come, deeper into the mountain laboratory. Korrina's despair over Lucario was soon tainted with rage at the person responsible. She got to her feet with some effort.

"Laevus!" she shouted. "Stop right there!"

Laevus ignored her and waddled out of the cavern after his two Agents, leaving a failing Mega Aggron and Mega Gallade to deal with Korrina and the others. Korrina wiped the tears from her face, not caring that she smeared a little blood on her face. Lucario's broken body lay at her feet.

"I'm sorry, Lucario," she said. "But I have to keep fighting."

Calem's Bisharp was now helping him against Mega Gallade, and the Blade Pokémon had his hands full fending off two jousters instead of just one. Aegislash defended a mighty Psycho Cut with a well-timed King's Shield that sent Mega Gallade flying into Bisharp's waiting razor blade arms. But Mega Gallade was lithe and fast, and he twisted in midair to meet Bisharp's blades with his own. Calem and Aegislash ran after him, not giving him an inch.

Pangoro sniffed at Lucario's carcass and nudged him, as if he were sleeping and might wake up. Korrina felt fresh tears in her eyes at the sight, and averted her gaze. She patted Pangoro on the shoulder.

"Good job, Pangoro. You fought well," she whispered before recalling him to his Pokéball to rest.

Only Blaziken remained, and he looked down on Lucario's carcass with solemn judgment like he always did. Korrina's breath hitched when Blaziken touched her shoulder with a clawed hand, almost reassuring, almost human.

But Korrina wanted no sympathy or reassurance. She wanted to hurt the ones responsible for this. Mega Aggron seemed like a good place to start.

"Blaziken," she said. "Kill that Mega Aggron."

Mega Abomasnow and Mega Aggron were still struggling, and it was amazing that Mega Abomasnow had put up such a good fight in the face of a severe type disadvantage. Korrina could only imagine how well Wulfric had trained him for him to do so much damage and last so long. But Mega Aggron had been frozen several times over and beaten relentlessly with Wood Hammer, and he was finally wearing down. Blaziken squawked and took off running.

Wulfric saw Blaziken coming and got out of the way. Mega Aggron roared as he saw Blaziken lunge at him with a Blaze Kick aimed at his neck, but he was too slow and bulky to dodge. Blaziken's fiery foot collided with Mega Aggron's head and sent him crashing to the ground. The force of the attack popped a plated scale clean off and exposed some tender flesh beneath. The fire did the rest of the work melting Mega Aggron's iron armor and burning the bit of exposed tender flesh beneath.

Mega Abomasnow raised his fists and smashed Mega Aggron's head with another Wood Hammer attack. The huge Armor Pokémon convulsed and tried to swat his assailants away with his tail, but to no avail. It was over in a matter of seconds, and Mega Aggron fell still. He slowly shrank as his reinforced outer shell dissolved, the Mega Evolution canceled, leaving a still enormous and formidable-looking Aggron in his place, dead to the world.

Korrina tossed out her remaining Pokéball, and Hawlucha appeared with a harried squawk. She pointed at Mega Gallade. "Hawlucha, give him a Flying Press."

Hawlucha took off at a low swoop and got right in the middle of Calem's battle with Mega Gallade, who had already sustained several deep gashes from the protracted fight against Aegislash and Bisharp.

Hawlucha swooped in out of nowhere and smacked Mega Gallade's head, knocking him down. It was just the opening Calem needed to send Aegislash in for the finishing blow, a Sacred Sword that lopped off Mega Gallade's head.

Calem's ragged breathing was for a moment the only sound that filled the cavern as he leaned on Aegislash's pommel to catch his breath. "I had it under control, Korrina," he said at length.

Hawlucha swooped back around and landed near Korrina and Blaziken, feathers ruffled like it was a huge inconvenience to be in such a cold and dirty place. Blaziken looked down on him like he was the inconvenience here, not the surroundings.

"This isn't a contest," Wulfric said gently. "We're here to help each other and to help Serena no matter what happens."

Wulfric's hand on Korrina's shoulder almost made her crumble. She'd forgotten how cold it was in here without her jacket, and his icy touch made her shiver.

Calem and his Pokémon joined them. Aegislash's creepy eye swiveled to see Korrina and Wulfric better, but Korrina found that she did not have the energy to feel creeped out. Blaziken was so warm standing next to her, and she leaned into him.

"Korrina, your arms," Calem said. "Wulfric, you're hurt, too."

"Be a lad and help me with my pack," Wulfric said, wincing as he shrugged off his backpack. "I'll need to see to Korrina's arms before we continue."

Calem looked like he wanted to argue for a moment, but decided against it and did as he was told. Soon, Korrina's arms were being bandaged and the bleeding had stopped. Calem surveyed the cavern.

"We should follow him. I bet he'll lead us right to Serena," Calem said. "We can't waste any more time here in case Grace hasn't found her yet."

"Korrina? Are you feeling up to it?" Wulfric asked.

"Yes," Korrina said readily.

Calem looked like he wanted to say something when he saw Lucario's and Pinsir's bodies lying dead together in the kitchen area. "...Oh, shit,

Lucario."

Korrina did not want to hear it. "Let's go. Wulfric, I'll help you with your pack."

Calem was staring at Lucario's carcass. "Korrina, I'm... I didn't know. I'm so sorry—"

"We need to keep moving," Korrina interrupted him. "Serena's still waiting."

"Yeah, but... Korrina, your Lucario is..."

Korrina retrieved her jacket and tried not to make a face at the feel of the wet sleeves on her skin. "Lucario fought to help Serena. He wouldn't want us wasting time here when she still needs us."

Calem did not know what to say to that.

"Blaziken, Hawlucha, let's go." Korrina signaled to her Pokémon to get moving.

Wulfric, Calem, and Mega Abomasnow were not far behind. Wulfric gulped down a Super Potion they'd brought to help with his broken ribs. Korrina took one last look at Lucario's body, wishing she could hold him one last time. But Serena was still waiting, still alive, from what Laevus had implied. Lucario could not be saved, but she could be. Korrina bit her lip hard as fresh tears threatened to fall.

A hand in hers startled her. It was Calem's, and it was just for a moment.

Serena can still be saved.

Hell if Korrina would let anything else stand in her way after Lucario's sacrifice. If she had to live on, then she would make sure Serena did, too.

Serena was already wide awake when they came for her. Trevor was out like a rock, still passed out even days after Malva's emergency surgery, waking only briefly to sip on broth to keep up his strength. But Serena could not sleep, and when she heard the frantic voices and footsteps earlier this morning, she knew something was wrong. Still, she sat tight and waited. It wasn't until she felt the tremors, like an earthquake was threatening the mountain base, that she really began

to worry. And to hope.

Can Calem's Pokémon use Earthquake? I don't remember...

She had always imagined that Calem would come after her, knowing him. But this felt bigger than anything Aegislash could do. This felt like a concussive rearranging of the earth, and whatever it was had the Flare Agents keeping her here very nervous. She banged on the door and called for the guard, but no one came. Where was everyone? Was she wrong? Was it not a rescue attempt like she'd dreamed about every time she closed her eyes, but instead some other new terror come to take her away and bury her in an even deeper hole than the one she was in? Would she ever see her loved ones again?

But no, she couldn't give in to doubt and fear. She had to be strong for Trevor's sake. He was just sixteen, just a kid, and while Serena was no paragon of wisdom and sagacity herself, she was an adult and a Tamer and the whole reason Trevor was here. If not for Laevus's experiments, he never would have needed her. And without Serena, he never would have needed Trevor to test his theories. It was her fault, her responsibility. And now, it was all coming crashing down, for better or for worse.

For worse, as it turned out. When they came for her, she was expecting them.

"Get up," said one of the two Flare Agents that had come to get her. "You're coming with us, Magus."

"Why? What's going on? What's all that noise?" Serena said.

"No questions, just get moving." One of the men, the one she knew as Ricardo, grabbed her roughly by the elbow and forced her to follow. His heartstrings, faint as they were, were erratic and pulsing.

He's afraid.

But why?

"You're hurting me! I'll go, but just tell me why," Serena said as she struggled to keep up.

"Boss wants you," Ricardo said. "Just shut up and do what you're told."

Serena tensed as true fear caught her in its icy grip. Laevus terrified her. Not because of the pain he inflicted, but because of the way he

didn't seem to realize or care about it. It had no effect on him. He'd tortured Trevor for days until Malva put a stop to it, never once giving a damn about the poor kid. And he'd tortured Serena, too, all for some crazy experiment he'd been working on for years. That was what all this was about, she'd learned. It was something to do with Mega Evolution, but she didn't really know much beyond that. Non-Tamers couldn't achieve Mega Evolution, Serena knew that from her time spent with Sycamore. And Laevus was no Tamer, not like his sister.

Tamer or skuff or whatever, Laevus was not a good person. He was terrible, numb, possibly psychotic, though she was no doctor and could not hope to know what was going on with him. Whatever he was doing, it had to be just as awful as he was. And now he was in need of her again. Serena resisted Ricardo unconsciously, like her body knew what lay ahead and would have rather died fighting than suffer it again.

The other Flare Agent, a bald man with one eye called Jacques, was one of the meaner ones around. He rarely spoke, and he always looked suspicious. Maybe if Serena had lost an eye, she'd be suspicious of other people, too. Jacques gave her a hard smack on the face to shut her up, not even speaking, and hauled her along like chattel. They locked the door behind them, leaving Trevor alone.

At least they're done with him, Serena thought.

Her cheek stung. She might get a black eye after that smack, it was very hard. Jacques was a hard man.

If I had my strength and my Pokémon, they'd be sorry.

But she didn't have her Pokémon. Malva had them. She was just a girl, skinny and alone and exhausted, lost somewhere and possibly dead to the world. And now she was back in the same torture chamber she'd come to fear the way some children fear the dark or closets or the space under the bed, the places where imaginary monsters rule. Except this monster's kingdom was real and full of needles and gurneys and dim lighting. Serena struggled against the two Flare captors, already dreading what was coming. There was only one reason they would drag her back to this room.

"Let me go!" she screamed as she flailed.

She managed to rip free of Ricardo's grip and ran, to where she had no idea, just away. But a flash of light later and something grabbed her from behind with meaty fists. Serena struggled desperately, but her

compounded sleepless nights, malnutrition, and near-constant anxiety over her situation and Trevor's made her slow and sloppy. The Gurdurr that had grabbed her was as tall as a man and thick as a tree; there was no way she'd break free of his grasp. The Fighter tossed her over his veiny shoulder like a sack of potatoes and hauled her back into the room where Jacques was waiting to strap her into an all-too-familiar gurney.

"Please continue to resist," Jacques said. "I would love a reason to break your leg next."

Ricardo didn't meet her gaze as he dutifully held down Serena's legs so Jacques could strap her in. The gurney was propped upright nearly at ninety degrees, so Serena was forced to balance on a small step and look down on her captors. The shackles were cold iron that she felt through her clothes, enervating to the touch as though they were sucking the life slowly out of her. Jacques' Gurdurr had her by the shoulders so she could not sit up, and soon Serena's hands, feet, and waist were shackled to the metal gurney. Ricardo locked the manacles with a key from the ring Laevus usually carried. Why did Ricardo have it? Where was Laevus?

The Flare Agents and Gurdurr released Serena, but she was strapped in tight and could hardly move except to look around. Her breathing had escalated, and she didn't know when she'd started perspiring. Cold sweat slicked her forehead and bangs, and she was shivering.

I'm afraid, she realized.

More than she'd ever been before in her time here. Something about today was different. Those pounding noises in the distance were intermittent and muffled, but she could still hear them. Something was happening, and she had no idea what part she would be playing in it. The lights flickered ominously just then, and Ricardo looked spooked.

"We should get back to the boss," Ricardo said. "Gurdurr can keep an eye on her for now."

"Yes," Jacques agreed. "But Gurdurr is coming with us." He recalled the beefy Fighter to its Pokéball.

"What? We can't just leave her unguarded," Ricardo protested. He was a small man, short with shifty eyes like he was always afraid someone would jump him.

"She's locked up. She's not going anywhere. Malva doesn't want any Pokémon around her," Jacques said, already heading back out. "Let's go."

Ricardo didn't look so sure, but he had no choice but to follow, and soon Serena was alone. She tried to break out of her restraints, but to no avail. She could not bend iron or break locks all on her own.

"Damn them," she said, her voice shaking with the urge to cry.

But she didn't even have the strength for that now. If only they'd left Gurdurr here, maybe she could have convinced him to help her.

Malva's too smart for that.

Whatever Malva's flaws, Serena could not deny that much. It was easy for Serena to read a Pokémon's emotions and coax it into doing what she wanted as long as she could see its heartstrings. Even people were easy to read as long as she paid attention. Malva couldn't know any of that, but she'd been on the receiving end of Serena's uncanny empathy enough times now to know *something*.

"So stupid," she berated herself.

Maybe if she'd kept things to herself more, she wouldn't be in this situation. But then, maybe Trevor would be dead. Was her own death her reward for helping Trevor? How was that fair? She'd already died once and been brought back to life by a Pokémon that hardly anyone even believed existed. She doubted she'd get a second chance.

The lights flickered again, and something boomed in the distance, much louder than the sounds she'd been hearing before. Serena gasped as she felt the earth shake, like part of the mountain was caving in. It passed in a few seconds, but the lights continued to flicker until soon they went out completely. Trapped alone in the dark, all Serena could hear was her own labored breathing.

"Please," she said.

Please what? No one was listening, no one was here. All this power she'd been given, and for what? All she'd gotten for it was pain and suffering for herself and for everyone around her. She thought of the people she'd left behind when Malva took her, Sycamore and everyone at the lab in Lumiose City. She thought of Alain, the first friend she ever made, and Calem, the last. She thought of Grace, who had hated her for what she'd become but had tried to love her again as best she

could. Grace, who had lost her daughter once only to lose her again, who was probably home worried sick and feeling just as helpless as Serena did now. And for what? Maybe Malva was right. How could Serena think about helping them, about helping Trevor, when she couldn't even help herself?

The lights came back on courtesy of a backup generator, pale and yellow but mercifully no longer flickering. Footsteps approached, and the source of Serena's fears appeared in all his 350 pounds of glory. Laevus waddled in after Jacques and Ricardo looking like he'd just run a marathon instead of the few yards he probably walked to get here. He was out of breath and very pale, sickly even, and he was tugging at his immense parka in an attempt to get it off.

"...show them," he was saying to himself more than to his subordinates. "I'll kill them all! They think they can come in here and take what's mine? I worked my whole life for this! I won't stand for it, I *won't*!"

His heartstrings, a feeble orange that paled in comparison to Malva's, nevertheless pulsed brightly now. Serena watched him, forgetting her despair for a moment as she tried to make sense of what she was seeing. The heartstrings were laced with orange like they'd always been, but threads of auburn intertwined with them, then silver, then blue, green and yellow and red and pink. Every color ebbed and flowed within Laevus's pulsating heartstrings, turgid and swollen as though diseased with something. Serena had never seen anything like it before. It was like he was somebody else, or many somebodies all crammed into one body.

"You! Get that IV prepared. I need the Magus's blood hot and fresh," Laevus ordered Ricardo.

"Y-Yes, Boss, right away." Ricardo scrambled to do as he was bid, while Jacques kept an eye on the way they'd come, like he was concerned that someone might be following them.

What's going on?

Laevus got his parka off, and sweat stains drenched his long underwear in the collar and armpits like he'd been working out for hours. He cradled his left arm to his chest as though it were broken. The sleeve was caked with old dried blood. Ricardo soon finished preparing an IV.

"Now what, Boss?" he asked.

"What do you think? Use it!"

"Uh, you mean, on her?" Ricardo glanced at Serena. "I dunno, Boss, I'm no doctor..."

Laevus sputtered. "Imbecile! Give it here, I'll do it myself, like I do *everything else*."

Serena remembered her fear all of a sudden and began to struggle as her body recoiled at the sight of the thick needle Laevus now wielded like an executioner wields an axe. He looked pained, stressed out more than usual, and he was sweating profusely as though he had a fever.

"Don't just stand there," Laevus snapped. "Roll up her sleeve and find the vein!"

Ricardo complied, and soon Serena had a rubber strap pulled tight around her upper arm to make her veins bulge. The skin on her forearm was raw and bruised and full of needle holes, old IVs Laevus had stuck her with. She began to panic.

"What do you need my blood for?" she said. "You took plenty already! Look at all those jars full of it!"

There was indeed a refrigerator in the room that contained multiple jars and vials of Serena's blood, drawn and saved for test purposes.

"Quiet! You will not speak, Magus," Laevus said as he jabbed the needle into her arm.

Serena yelped in pain and jerked violently, but the manacles kept her in place. Her arm felt like someone had scraped the skin off it with a rusty knife, peeling back the layers like strips of jerky. The area around the newest needle was red and swollen and surrounded by blotchy bruising that would only get worse, she knew. How much blood would Laevus have to draw before she lost too much to survive?

"Good, good," Laevus said. "This will give me the power I need, yes."

Serena was dizzy and lightheaded as she felt her lifeblood slowly seep out of her. The many colors staining Laevus's heartstrings danced like a kaleidoscope.

"You're sick," she said. Her tongue felt heavy and thick in her mouth.

Laevus glared up at her. "I told you to be quiet," he hissed.

"Your heartstrings," she pressed. "There's something...different about you. You're not...you."

At this, Laevus perked up. "Ah, so you noticed. Yes, I'm not me anymore. I'm so much more. And soon those entitled freaks will see it, too. I'll show the whole world!"

"Boss," Jacques said, "I heard something. I'll check it out."

"Be quick about it! I need more time," Laevus said.

Jacques headed off down one of the corridors and disappeared around a corner. Laevus, meanwhile, snapped at Ricardo to take the IV tube and hold it just so, while he struggled with the sleeve of his uninjured arm.

"Damnit, help me with this!"

Ricardo jumped to oblige, wary of Laevus's temper. The sleeve wouldn't roll up over Laevus's fleshy arm, so Ricardo ripped it open. The sight that greeted Serena made her remaining blood run cold.

"Oh my god," she said. "What have you done?"

Three shards of the Mega Stone were embedded in Laevus's right arm, the clear cause of his tarnished heartstrings. Blood stained his left sleeve, and peeking out beneath it Serena could see the edge of another Mega Stone shard. She felt the overwhelming urge to vomit, but her stomach was empty. How many shards had Laevus implanted in himself?

"Boss, your left hand," Ricardo said.

"What?" Laevus looked at his left hand and tugged at the sleeve. Sure enough, Serena could make out another Mega Stone shard and the beginnings of a second embedded in the skin, which had turned black with rot. The shade was spreading down his wrist to his hand, the source of Ricardo's worry. But most worrisome of all was the pitch black hue of the visible shards in Laevus's left arm. There was nothing there, no heartstrings, no light, nothing at all. Just a vacuum full of rot.

What the hell did he do?

She remembered the way one Mega Stone shard had crippled Trevor before Malva ripped it out of him. Laevus carried multiple shards in his body. What effect would they have on him?

"Stop this," Serena said. "Those Mega Stone shards are poisoning you, just like they did to Trevor."

Laevus had had enough of Serena's insolence and slapped her hard across the face, the same cheek Jacques had abused earlier. Serena saw stars as her head whipped around, and she tasted blood on her lips. Her vision danced, a whorl of colors as Laevus's diseased heartstrings roiled like so many snakes, hissing and squeezing.

"I said *quiet*!" Laevus screamed.

Serena's head swam, and all she could do was cough pathetically.

"Do it now," Laevus commanded Ricardo.

"Boss, I-I dunno about this. Your arm..."

There was a short scuffle, and Ricardo was knocked down and hit his head on the table hard enough to knock him out. The key ring was strapped to his belt and clattered on the stone when he fell, far out of reach. Laevus grabbed the IV tube and opened it over his exposed right arm directly onto the Mega Stone shards embedded in his skin. Serena could only watch as the Mega Stone shards' vampiric appetites drank up her blood and the pink heartstrings that surrounded it. The shards exploded with light in every color, ravenous heartstrings that coiled around Laevus's right arm and snaked over his body, mummifying him in poisonous color.

"Now," he said, his voice strained. "Now, I'll show them!"

He produced three Pokéballs from his pocket and released them all. There was a fearsome Pidgeot, a tall and muscular Loppuny, and a bulky blue Swampert.

Something crashed not far off, but Laevus didn't seem to care. The three Pokémon looked distressed at the sight of each other and of Laevus, and for a moment Serena thought they might attack him or each other. But Laevus held out his bloody right arm to them.

"I'm your master now!" he said. "Obey me!"

Serena watched in awe and terror as the Mega Stone shards'

heartstrings only she could see took on a life of their own, entrapping the three Pokémon in invisible silken cocoons.

"Stop!" she screamed, but it was too late.

Grace ran after Klefki through the sprawling subterranean Flare base, never knowing which way was the right way and completely lost. Klefki alone seemed to know where to go, and she hoped that he hadn't taken a wrong turn somewhere. As she went, she could still hear the sounds of Calem and Alain fighting Malva and her underlings, ominous booming that echoed like distant thunder. She could only imagine what they were doing, and prayed that Korrina and Wulfric were all right wherever they were.

Grace and Klefki came to a three-way fork in the corridor and paused. "Damnit, which way? Klefki, do you know?"

Klefki jingled as he peered down the branching corridors, which was very little help in this situation. He seemed most interested in the middle path, but all of a sudden something drew his attention down the rightmost path. Excited, Klefki jingled loudly to get Grace's attention.

"What is it? Is it Serena?"

Something roared not so far away down the leftmost path, a carnal bellow unlike Grace had ever heard before. She clutched her heart and backed up against the nearest wall, breathing fast as an otherworldly fear took hold of her. What the hell had made such a racket? She did not want to find out.

Klefki took off down the rightmost path, leaving Grace to follow if she chose. She nearly tripped over herself running to catch up with the exuberant Fairy, wondering if whatever had roared so loudly had frightened Klefki, too. What if whatever it was had Serena? Grace could not entertain the thought. She had to trust that Klefki knew where he was going and that they would find Serena.

All the corridors looked the same to Grace, marked by the same fluorescent lamps hammered into the stone. There were iron doors, all closed, that she passed every once in a while, but Klefki did not seem interested in them, so neither was Grace. Whatever these Team Flare scientists were doing here, she didn't give a damn. All she wanted was to find her daughter alive and well.

When they reached a dead end, Grace nearly broke down. Her body shook with the effects of adrenaline coursing through her veins, and she was starting to question if this was really the right way.

"Klefki, where are we? Where's Serena?" Grace said.

Klefki paused at the last door on the right and jingled at Grace like he wanted her to do something about it.

"In there?" Grace asked, trying the handle. It was locked, of course.

If Serena's in there, no door can keep me out.

Grace stood back and released both Rhyhorn and Fletchling. Fletchling tweeted excitedly and flapped about the narrow corridor, curious about these unfamiliar surroundings, while Rhyhorn seemed at once on his guard. Rhyhorn was as big as a motorcycle, and these corridors were clearly built for people to navigate, not Pokémon. Nevertheless, Rhyhorn looked to Grace for direction. Fletchling tweeted incessantly at Klefki, who answered with an annoyed jingle.

"Rhyhorn, break down that door," Grace commanded.

Rhyhorn growled and slowly ambled into place in line with the door. He was not used to this whole battling thing Grace was doing lately, but like any Pokémon, fighting was in his nature in the right circumstances. Once he was properly lined up, Rhyhorn charged the iron door and smashed clean through it. The door swung open on its hinges, bent and dented, and nearly fell off. Rhyhorn backed out of the room on his thick stubby legs, and Grace all but climbed over him to get inside, Fletchling and Klefki close behind.

It was a bedroom, but there was no sign of Serena. Grace looked around and threw back the covers, checked the armoire, but no luck. Frustrated, she balled her fists and turned on Klefki.

"She's not here," she said. "I thought you could find Serena."

Klefki was too distracted by something on the desk to be afraid of Grace's ire. Fletchling landed on the desk, curious about whatever Klefki had found, and chirped. Rhyhorn looked on from the hall.

"What is it? Serena's not even here," Grace said, though she went to the desk to see what the big deal was.

On the desk were three Pokéballs Grace recognized instantly from the

little pink heart stickers taped to them. Her anger forgotten, Grace scooped them up as though they were precious gems.

"Serena's Pokéballs," she said, awestruck. She never thought she would see these again.

Klefki jingled excitedly as he hovered closer to get a better look at them.

"You sensed them here?" Grace said, feeling a little bad for her earlier frustration with Klefki.

Serena loved her Pokémon. She would want them to be safe. Grace hurriedly pocketed the three Pokéballs, amazed that they had been left in here. Whose room was this, anyway?

Outside, Rhyhorn growled all of a sudden and stamped the floor. Fletchling flew out of the room to see what all the ruckus was about, and Grace and Klefki followed. A small red Pokémon the size of a volleyball was rolling around in between Rhyhorn's short legs, spooked by the larger Pokémon but not fast enough to get out from underneath him. He must have escaped this room when Rhyhorn broke down the door.

"What on earth?" Grace kneeled down and snatched the small Pokémon before Rhyhorn could step on him.

It was a Darumaka, red and furry, and as soon as Grace picked him up, he latched onto her jacket and would not let go. Fletchling landed on her shoulder and chirped angrily at Darumaka, offended that he would dare to touch Grace's jacket. Darumaka was doing his best to burrow into Grace's neck.

"What the— Hey, let go." Grace pried Darumaka off her jacket and held him out in front of her.

Darumaka squirmed and slipped out of her grip to roll down the hallway. Grace got up and jogged after him.

"Hey, wait!"

Darumaka rolled right into the last door on the left at the end of the hall and began to ram it unceremoniously. Grace had no idea what to make of the strange Pokémon's behavior.

"S-Serena?" a small voice said on the other side of the door.

Grace paled at the sound of her daughter's name. "Hello? Who's in there?"

There was movement on the other side of the door, then a thud like something soft had fallen on the floor. Someone began to cough. Grace was beside herself at the thought that Serena might be inside.

"Rhyhorn, break it down," she said. "Stand back from the door!" she called to whoever was inside.

Darumaka continued to Rollout the door to little avail, and Grace scooped him up before he could hurt himself. Darumaka squealed in distress, and Fletchling tweeted angrily at him like he was such a bother rolling around like he owned the place. There could only be one small annoying red Pokémon in this group, and it sure as hell was not Darumaka as long as Fletchling had anything to say about it. Rhyhorn smashed the door down, and when he got out of the way Grace rushed inside. A young boy wrapped in blankets lay sprawled on the floor, and for a moment Grace was sure he was dead. But then he spoke.

"W-Who're you?" he managed.

Grace covered her mouth in horror. "Oh my god."

Darumaka wriggled free again and rolled to the boy's side, grunting excitedly. The boy laid a hand on Darumaka's back.

"Maru? What're you doing here?" he said.

Grace rushed to the sickly boy's side. "What happened to you? Do you know my daughter? You said her name just a minute ago. Is she here?"

The boy blinked bleary eyes up at Grace. He couldn't have been more than fifteen or sixteen, just a child, but he was as weak and sickly as an old man.

My god, what happened to you?

"You mean Serena?" the boy said. "You know Serena?"

Grace could have cried. "Yes! She's my daughter. You know her? Where is she?"

The boy's eyes went wide. "You're Serena's mother? What're you doing

here?"

She could not leave this poor boy here. From the looks of it, he was a prisoner here. Maybe they'd experimented on him as they most likely had on Serena. For what purpose, Grace could not even begin to imagine.

"What's your name?" Grace said, trying her best to sound calm and reassuring.

The boy did his best to look alert. "Trevor," he said. "S-Serena, they took her, I think. I was asleep."

Grace took Trevor's shoulders in her hands gently and searched his eyes. "Who took her? She was here? Where did she go?"

Trevor's mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water as he tried to form the words. "I'm... I don't..."

Grace did not have time for this. If someone had taken Serena, then she had to be nearby. Trevor began to weep softly.

"S-She promised we'd get out of h-here," he sobbed.

"Well, it's your lucky day, Trevor. I'm Grace, and I'm getting you out. Come on now, let's get you up."

Grace hauled him to his feet, and he cried out and leaned his weight on her. He could barely walk. If this what they'd done to Trevor, what had they done to Serena? Grace felt her fears taking over again, threatening to cripple her, but if she gave out now, Trevor wouldn't make it on his own. He needed her help.

"Come on, up you go," Grace said as she hoisted Trevor onto Rhyhorn's back. "Have you ever ridden a Rhyhorn before?"

Trevor looked like he might pass out at any moment. "No."

She did her best to look encouraging. "I've raced Rhyhorn my whole life. This one's a smoother ride than any Skiddo, so you can just relax and let him do all the work, okay?"

Trevor laid his shaking hands on Rhyhorn's shale hide. They were mottled with bruises and old scabs, and Grace felt a fresh wave of tears threatening to fall. "Okay," he said.

Darumaka rolled and ran into Rhyhorn's back leg. he jumped and tried

to climb up onto Rhyhorn's back, but his stubby arms and legs did not get him far. Grace scooped him up and handed him to Trevor.

"This little guy yours?" she asked.

"No," he said. "But Maru really likes Serena. We both do."

Darumaka grunted and bared his teeth in what could have passed for a goofy smile as he clung to Trevor's blanket.

"Is my mom here, too?" Trevor asked.

"No, I'm sorry," Grace said. "But I promise I'll get you out of here so you can see her again very soon. Just hold on, okay?"

Trevor blinked and a few tears fell down his cheeks. "You sound like her," he said. "Like Serena."

Grace did not know what to say to that, so she just nodded. Trevor would probably slow her down, but there was no way she could just leave him. His mother would be worried out of her mind for him, just as Grace was worried about Serena. No, Grace would make sure Trevor got out of here along with Serena and everyone else.

"Klefki, let's go," Grace said. "Find Serena now."

Klefki jingled and zoomed down the hall the way they'd come. Fletchling tweeted excitedly and flew after him, and Grace and the others followed. Soon, they were back at the three-way fork in the road, and this time Klefki took the middle road. Grace had to wonder just how intelligent Klefki and Serena's other Fairies really were. It was almost as if Klefki had planned to gather Serena's other Pokémon and Trevor before tracking down Serena. She put the thought out of her mind and raced after the odd Keychain Pokémon.

They didn't get far when the power went out all of a sudden for a few seconds, and Grace felt her heart leap into her throat. The outage lasted only a few seconds, though, and a backup generator powered up. The lights were dimmer than before, but Grace could see well enough. She turned back to check on Trevor, but he was still riding Rhyhorn and stared back with a haunted look like he'd recently been brought back from the dead.

"Are you okay back there, Trevor?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said.

Satisfied, Grace continued on with Klefki and Fletchling in the lead, but they didn't get far before the Pokémon spooked. Someone was coming. Grace put her hand back to stop Rhyhorn from getting any closer.

"Who's there?" a man's voice demanded.

He was around the bend in the corridor up ahead. Grace had no idea what to do. She'd never fought in a real Pokémon battle against a trainer before. Someone came around the corner, or rather, something. A Gurdurr as tall as she was appeared with a wiry one-eyed man, his trainer. Fletchling tweeted obnoxiously, unafraid of the big Fighter for no good reason. Klefki was more wary.

"Who are you?" the man demanded.

"I'm here for my daughter," Grace said, unwilling to show this man any fear. He wore the red and white colors of the Team Flare Agents that had attacked Calem and her when they first arrived.

"So, you're with the Gym Leaders," the man said. "But you don't look like a Gym Leader to me."

Gym Leaders?

He must have meant Korrina and Wulfric. Were they fighting somewhere? Oh god, were they still alive? Grace had no idea, and that roar from before... She couldn't think about it right now. This guy was in the way, and she'd be damned if he stopped her from finding Serena.

"Get out of my way," she said.

The man and Gurdurr did no such thing, and Gurdurr cracked his knuckles in warning as he approached.

"Stop," Grace said, backing up.

"You're an intruder," the man said. "Which means I have leave to do with you as I please."

Gurdurr growled and revealed a mouth full of flat yellowing teeth. The purple veins in his muscled arms bulged like leeches gorged on blood.

"I said stop!" Grace said.

"Gurdurr, use Dynamic Punch," the man commanded.

"Grace, look out!" Trevor said.

Gurdurr clenched a fist, which began to glow with power. He advanced, his trainer close behind with a metal beater stick. Grace backtracked in fear.

"S-Stop right there!" she screamed.

Gurdurr pulled back and prepared to lunge straight for her, but Klefki scintillated with bright pink light and the punch never connected. Fletchling tweeted manically as he flew in circles, and Grace could only wonder at this new magic Klefki had pulled out from his tiny body. Gurdurr and his trainer both had frozen as if time had stopped all around them. They could barely move as pulsating pink strands of light as fine as thread trapped them like chains. The threads extended from Klefki's jeweled core and pulsed in tune with his little heartbeat. Grace stared, unsure what to make of this.

"H-Heartstrings?" Trevor said, equally shocked at the sight.

"What?" Grace said, still marveling at the sight.

"Serena said she could see them," Trevor said, reaching out a hand toward the softly shining threads of light suddenly made visible with Kelfki's Fairy Lock attack. They undulated as they came into contact with Trevor's fingers, alive.

"What is this?" the Flare Agent demanded mid-stride.

Grace remembered herself and her mission. She didn't care who this guy was or what Pokémon he had. There was no way he was keeping her from getting to Serena.

"Fletchling, use Peck!" she commanded.

Fletchling happily gave in to his inner angry bird and attacked the Flare Agent. The tiny bird viciously pecked out his remaining eye, and he screamed, unable to move to defend himself. Grace grabbed the metal beater stick from him.

"Go to hell," she spat before smacking him in the back with all her strength.

The Flare Agent fell, and Kelfki's spell was broken. Gurdurr tripped

over himself, and his powered-up fist landed in the wall up to his elbow. Rhyhorn lowered his head and barreled on through past Gurdurr, clipping his backside and causing the Fighter to howl in pain. The Flare Agent was out cold and bleeding from his ruined eye socket.

The pink heartstrings Klefki had summoned to bind the enemies unfurled and faded from sight again as they looped back around Klefki.

Is this what your world looks like, Serena? Grace wondered.

Klefki took off again down the corridor where the Flare Agent had come from, and Fletchling went after him.

"Trevor, let's go," Grace called back to the young boy riding Rhyhorn.

"Y-Yeah," he said, urging Rhyhorn along.

Korrina led the others in search of Laevus once the three Mega Pokémon had been taken care of. Calem could hardly believe what was happening. One Mega Pokémon was fearsome enough, but to face three? He'd arrived late to the party and still had no idea how it was even possible except for Wulfric's rushed explanation that Laevus was behind it all.

"I bet he's got Serena with him," Calem said as they followed the corridor deeper into the base.

"Might be you're right," Wulfric said. "Best to keep moving before he can call any other Mega Pokémon to help him."

"You can't be serious," Calem said. "How could he possibly have more?"

"Ever since I met you guys and gals, 'possible' became a heckuva lot more flexible in my book, I tell you."

Korrina had her Blaziken out with her, and the thing still freaked Calem out even though Blaziken was on his side. He could imagine what she must be feeling with Lucario gone. When Escavalier died right in front of him at Malva's hand, he'd felt the loss so acutely that he'd let his guard down, and Malva had the opening she needed to roast his arms. For Korrina to lose her best Pokémon was a blow that cut deeply. She was silent as they searched for Laevus, and Calem

wasn't sure that was really a good thing.

When they finally caught up to Laevus, he was holed up in a cavern almost as vast as the one where Calem and Alain had been ambushed by Malva. Like the ceiling in that cavern, this one was also made of glass to cover a natural opening in the rock above, though much smaller than the other one. Laevus was there, and Calem arrived just in time to see the fruits of Laevus's experiments unfold before his eyes.

His right arm was exposed and bloody, and he stood behind three big Pokémon that writhed as though they were being squeezed by invisible strings. Laevus was shouting something at them, and they began to transform. In a matter of seconds, Calem and his group were facing a fresh Mega defensive team in Mega Lopunny, Mega Swampert, and Mega Pidgeot.

"Well, that's not a good sign," Wulfric said.

"Oh my god," Calem said, his stomach twisting in fear. "You have to be kidding me!"

Mega Swampert roared. He was as big as Korrina's Pangoro with enormous arms and upper body strength. One Earthquake could surely tear down this entire mountain, Calem was sure of it. Mega Lopunny, though roughly proportionate to a very fit human, boasted long muscular legs that looked even more fearsome than a Hitmonlee's. But Mega Pidgeot had to be the worst of them. Towering taller than a Charizard, Mega Pidgeot was a predator in every sense of the word with a curved beak and talons as thick around as Calem's arms. She let out a piercing cry and took to the air in a magnificent flurry of blue and gold feathers, as beautiful as she was daunting.

"You again!" Laevus shouted at Calem's group. "Back for more, eh? Behold, the power of science! This is *my* Mega Evolution!"

He held up his right arm, and Korrina gasped.

"No way," she said. "Those're Mega Stones in his arm!"

Calem did not really know what that meant or what was going on, only that there were three new Mega Pokémon facing them and they only had one. Mega Abomasnow bellowed in challenge as he got a whiff of Mega Swampert, but he was still favoring his side after the hard battle against Mega Aggron.

And that was when Calem saw her. Way at the other end of the room

behind Laevus, there was a woman strapped to a raised gurney. It was hard to see her face from here, but there was no way it could be anybody else.

"Serena!" he shouted.

The woman stirred and her head lolled. She was alive. Calem could have cried.

It's her! She's alive!

"That's enough! The Magus belongs to *me*!" Laevus cried. "Kill them!"

Laevus's little army of Mega Pokémon attacked, and soon Calem was fighting for his life all over again. Or running, as it were. Mega Pidgeot swooped and made to snatch him up like dinner, but Aegislash's shield quickly flew in between them, and Mega Pidgeot hit the King's Shield barrier she created.

"Calem, take out that bird!" Korrina said as she ran at Mega Lopunny herself.

"What the—*Korrina*!" Calem shouted.

But Korrina did not hesitate as she jabbed at Mega Lopunny ruthlessly. Blaziken was close behind, and the two of them engaged the overgrown Fighter rabbit together. Wulfric and Mega Abomasnow faced off against Mega Swampert, and Wulfric released his Avalugg to help. It was just in time to catch a monstrous Hydro Pump. Avalugg took the attack head-on, and the water froze instantaneously. The frost raced along the column of water toward Mega Swampert, who was forced to disengage to avoid being frozen. Mega Pidgeot swooped around for a Sky Attack.

"Oh crap!"

Calem ran and swung around with Aegislash. Bisharp ran the other way, narrowly avoiding Mega Pidgeot's dive-bomber attack, but Aegislash's blade missed Mega Pidgeot in turn by mere inches.

I have to get to Serena!

But as soon as he took a few steps, Mega Pidgeot was back, this time with a Hyper Beam that cut across the cavern floor, tearing up lab equipment and stone alike. Avalugg was hit as the beam passed by and lost his footing, which gave Mega Swampert a chance to attack

with Muddy Water spewed from his wide flat mouth. The dirty water slammed into Mega Abomasnow and Wulfric himself, and Wulfric went tumbling. The water began to freeze all around him as he struggled to his feet. The Hyper Beam was headed straight for Korrina next.

"Korrina, look out!" Calem shouted as he ran and swung Aegislash in a Night Slash he prayed would wound Mega Pidgeot.

The Hyper Beam interrupted the fist fight between Korrina and Mega Lopunny, and the latter used her powerful hind legs to jump to safety. Korrina was blown back by the blast and skidded across the floor until Blaziken caught her and kept her from slamming into a table.

"Blaziken," Korrina groaned.

Aegislash's Night Slash sent a dark claw of energy at Mega Pidgeot, but the bird was quick and dove before the attack could connect. The dark energy hit the wall just below the glass ceiling and opened up a sizeable crack in the stone. As long as Mega Pidgeot could Fly and Aegislash could not, Calem was at a severe disadvantage, and so was everyone else.

Mega Abomasnow began to conjure a frigid Blizzard at Wulfric's command. The aging Gym Leader had pulled himself from the semi-frozen Muddy Water, filthy but still fighting, and had his eyes on Mega Pidgeot. Good, Calem thought. There was nowhere Mega Pidgeot could hide from a Blizzard. However, there was still Mega Swampert to contend with.

"Stop that Blizzard!" Laevus shouted.

Mega Swampert intended to do just that as he took off at a mighty lope for Mega Abomasnow. Above, Mega Pidgeot squawked in distress as the temperature in the room plummeted and frostlings rose from Mega Abomasnow like reverse-falling snow. For a precious moment, the path to Serena was clear as the enemy was distracted. If Calem made a break for it, he might be able to reach her now. Everything he'd been fighting for, everything could be realized in this moment.

Mega Swampert closed in on Wulfric and Mega Abomasnow, and Avalugg, slow and ungainly as he was, did his best to intercept despite his leg injury. Calem knew his decision was made even before he could weigh it. His feet moved of their own accord, nearly slipping on the frozen stone. It was freezing in here, and every breath was a stab to the lungs as he sucked in the stale air and willed himself to move

faster. Mega Swampert was nearly upon them, those huge fists poised to Hammer Arm Wulfric and Mega Abomasnow to a bloody pulp.

Calem lunged with his left hand, his shield hand, and skidded on the ice. "King's Shield!"

Mega Swampert collided with Aegislash's shield in a devastating impact. The bright silver light barrier that had always protected Calem shattered under Mega Swampert's sheer force, and through their shared connection, Calem felt his mighty shield crack.

"Back off!" he screamed as he punched with his sword hand.

Aegislash's blade came in fast and hard with an Iron Head that connected with Mega Swampert's thick arm, and the beast cried out in pain. Calem felt himself falling, slipping on the ice and under the force of Mega Swampert's brute strength. But Aegislash's aim was true, and the demonic sword ran red with Mega Swampert's blood as she withdrew.

Calem barely had time to catch his breath when out of nowhere, Mega Lopunny, taking advantage of the chaos, came down hard with a High Jump Kick meant to bash Calem's skull in. Bisharp skidded in front of her trainer to defend despite the severe type disadvantage, blades poised. Calem stared in horror as he envisioned yet another of his Pokémon falling to the enemy's violence. He could not even find his voice to warn off Bisharp.

A blur of red and black slammed into Mega Lopunny and knocked her off course just then, and Calem almost lost control of his bladder in the split second during which all of this happened and he was sure he and Bisharp were both dead. A hand grabbed his and hauled him up.

"K-Korrina!" Calem found his voice.

One of her eyes was swollen shut and she had a bad cut in her head from the latest bout with Mega Lopunny, but Calem followed her gaze to where Mega Lopunny was now fighting Blaziken, or what had once been Blaziken.

"Is that...?"

"Yeah," Korrina said. "Lucario wouldn't have wanted us to give up no matter what."

Mega Blaziken was a sight to behold as he fought claw to paw with

Mega Lopunny, two expert Fighters beyond even the capabilities of a Bellatrix like Korrina. Mega Blaziken was taller and even more terrifying to behold than his normal form, like some hellish chimera that had emerged from the darkest pits of the underworld. He moved so fluidly that Calem couldn't even distinguish between his moves. Ribbons of fire laced Mega Blaziken's kicks and punches, and somehow Mega Lopunny was still able to dodge and parry and jab as though they had rehearsed it all before. Fighting Mega Gallade had been a dance Calem knew, a dance of swords. This was something else entirely.

"I didn't think you could do that with Blaziken," Calem said.

"This is the first time," Korrina said. "But it sure as hell won't be the last. Can you move?"

Calem could move, though his hip was on fire from the fall he'd taken. Mega Swampert was in worse shape with a hole in one of his arms courtesy of Aegislash, and Aegislash's shield was cracked.

"This is crazy. Nothing's ever broken Aegislash's King's Shield," Calem said, studying the cracks. "I can't defend anymore."

"Then focus on attacking," Korrina said.

"I s'pose I'll be the first to admit I was not prepared for what just happened," Wulfric said, joining them. "Thank you, Calem."

He was clutching his side and hunched over, and Calem worried that the fall he'd taken had exacerbated his earlier injuries. Mega Abomasnow's Blizzard died down prematurely when he realized the danger Wulfric was in, and Mega Pidgeot was still airborne. Only Hawlucha faced her now, and the Flyer's small size advantage was waning fast as Mega Pidgeot made it her mission to rip him to shreds. Korrina swore as she followed their erratic trajectory.

"I've still got Staraptor," Calem said. "She'll help."

He was about to release Staraptor when something flashed across the cavern. A beam of bright pink light singed Mega Pidgeot's tail feathers and bought Hawlucha enough time to get clear of her talons. The strange beam struck the wall just above the crack Aegislash's Night Slash had opened up earlier, and the glass ceiling shattered. Laevus shouted something that sounded frantic, and Calem watched as a thick shard of glass struck him in the leg. It was not enough to kill him, but he was now on the ground and struggling. A few shards hit Mega

Swampert, but the huge beast barely felt them even as some of the larger ones embedded in his back.

"I don't think we'll need Staraptor anymore," Wulfric said.

Calem followed his gaze up and up where a large avian creature was now pursuing Mega Pidgeot, one that looked a little familiar under all downy white.

"What the hell?" Korrina said. "What is that?"

"It's her," Calem said, spying her on the beast's back as he chased Mega Pidgeot out of the hole in the glass ceiling and outside into the night. "That's Serena!"

When Grace and Trevor arrived at the place where Klefki thought Serena was being held, it was just in time to witness some macabre ritual. A very fat man was emptying blood onto his exposed arm, where three shimmering jewels had been wedged into the skin. Three big Pokémon surrounded him, ones Grace wanted to avoid at all costs. But it wasn't the man she was concerned with. Serena herself was strapped to some sort of gurney, and the blood the man was pouring onto his arm was coming from her.

Grace nearly lost her composure right there and screamed for her daughter. She was so close, and it hurt to see her like this. It was Trevor who stopped Grace from making a huge mistake.

"Grace, wait," he said in his exhausted tinny voice. "That's Laevus, the s-scientist who's been experiment on Serena and me."

Laevus.

This was the man Alain had told them about. He was the reason for all this, Serena's kidnapping, Calem's subsequent disfigurement, this entire harrowing journey. It was all for this man's twisted ambitions, whatever they may be. Grace had not wanted to see someone dead so much since Malva.

The Pokémon surrounding Laevus transformed as though by magic, growing into grotesque caricatures of themselves as whatever power he'd awakened took hold. Klefki was eerily silent as he watched, perhaps as terrified as Grace was furious. It was not a good sign. Only Darumaka seemed eager to act and hopped out of Trevor's arms. He rolled into the cavernous laboratory before Grace could snatch him up

and went right to Serena like nothing was amiss.

Before Grace could do anything about it, the sounds of battle broke out, and she peered around the wall hiding Trevor and her to see what was happening.

Calem. And Korrina and Wulfric!

They were here, and they were fighting Laevus's Pokémon now.

"Serena!" she heard Calem shout, as desperate as she felt.

Grace clutched a hand over her heart.

"You brought friends?" Trevor asked.

"Yes. They're here to help." She turned back to Trevor. "Trevor, stay here with Rhyhorn out of sight. I'm going to free Serena."

Trevor looked like he did not like that idea. "B-But Laevus'll see you."

"No, the others will keep him busy. I'll be careful. I just need you to stay safe and watch the door. Can you do that for me?"

Trevor nodded numbly. Grace left Fletchling with him, instructing the tiny bird to watch the hall and alert her if anybody came. Fletchling chirped and perched on Rhyhorn's head to keep a lookout. Slowly, and with great trepidation, Grace emerged from the exit and quietly made her way around lab tables and chairs to Serena. Laevus's back was turned as he screamed at his Pokémon to kill the intruders, and Grace saw her chance.

She made a run for Serena, and Klefki was hot on her heels. In the commotion of the battle, Laevus was too distracted to hear her.

"Oh, Serena!" Grace reached her daughter and took her face in her hands.

Serena was dazed and a little dirty. Her hair was a tangled ponytail, unwashed, and her clothes were not hers and a few sizes too big. But she was Serena, plain as day, and for a moment she didn't recognize Grace.

"What?" Serena mumbled.

Klefki got in her face and jingled excitedly. This was no time for sleeping, silly human!

"Serena, it's me. It's Mom. Come on, wake up sweetie," Grace said.

Serena blinked bleary blue eyes down at Grace. "...Mom?"

The tears broke free and streamed down Grace's face as she nodded. Her throat tightened with emotion as she saw the recognition in Serena's eyes. "Yes, it's me. I'm here to take you home, baby."

Serena just stared like she could not believe her eyes. "Mom? What... What're you doing here? Why are you here?"

"I came to get you."

"You... You came for me?"

Klefki jingled and jangled, happy to be reunited with Serena at last. Serena struggled against the restraints holding her in place. They appeared to be locked.

"Yes. I have to get you out of these. Damnit, where's the key?" Grace looked around.

"Klefki," Serena said. "Go find the key. Over there." She nodded her head, and Klefki immediately moved to obey. He began poking around an unconscious Flare Agent several yards away.

Grace, meanwhile, tore the IV hose out of Serena and gasped at the state of Serena's arm. It was riddled with bruises and swollen red and ugly. A number of needle marks peppered the skin. Grace shook with rage at the evidence of her daughter's mistreatment. Serena's cheek was an unhealthy shade of red, too, and looked like it would bruise in time.

"Who did this to you? That Laevus guy?" Grace demanded.

A loud crack sounded somewhere above where something bit into the stone. Grace winced at the vicious sound and hoped Calem and the others were okay.

"Who is that?" Serena asked. "I thought I heard Calem, but I was dreaming."

"It's not a dream, sweetie. Calem's here. He helped me get here. And there's the Snowbelle Gym Leader, Wulfric, and Gym Leader Korrina from Shalour City. Alain's here, too. He's fighting Malva."

Serena was quiet for a moment. "...You brought all of those people?"

"I'm going to get you out of here, Serena. Save your strength, okay?"

Klefki returned with the key ring and handed it off to Grace. There were several keys on the ring, and Grace's fingers fumbled with each one as she tried them. A cold snap made her knees buckle all of a sudden, and unbelievably, snow began to flurry about the cavern. Grace's teeth chattered and she hastily unlocked the manacles holding Serena in place one by one.

"Mom, you have to help my friend. He's just a kid, and they have him locked up," Serena said.

"You mean Trevor? I've already got him. He's with Rhyhorn over there."

The last shackle was unlocked, and Serena all but fell into Grace's waiting arms. Grace wept silently as she held her daughter for the first time in weeks. There had been nights when she'd feared Serena was lost forever, dead somewhere, never to be heard from again. But here she was, real and solid and warm and very much alive. Just like that day so many years ago, Serena had found her way back.

"Oh, Serena," Grace sobbed into her daughter's shoulder. "I was so afraid for you. I was going crazy imagining what could have happened to you, and I came all this way hoping to find you. Oh god, Serena, I'm so sorry this happened to you. I'm so sorry I couldn't protect you."

Serena's hands clutched at Grace's jacket as Klefki jingled above them and the sounds of battle raged on behind them, far away. Darumaka tugged insistently at Serena's pant leg, wanting a hug of his own. Grace felt Serena hug her back, and after a moment they parted. There were tears in Serena's eyes, blue eyes just like Grace's.

"Mom, you came all this way for me?" she said.

Grace sniffled. "Of course. Serena, I love you."

Serena laughed through her tears and hugged Grace again. "I love you, too, Mom."

"What is this?!"

Laevus had noticed them finally. Grace saw him coming and positioned herself in front of Serena.

"Who are you? What are you doing with my Magus?" he demanded.

Grace clenched her fists and Klefki jingled angrily. "Take another step toward my daughter and I swear to god I'll make you sorry."

Laevus was taken aback at Grace's forcefulness and paused.

"Serena! Grace!"

Trevor and Rhyhorn emerged from the doorway nearby, and Fletchling flew to Grace's shoulder protectively.

"Trevor!" Serena said.

Laevus eyed the large Rhyhorn with a wary eye, and his jowls shook with rage. "No, no, *no*! You can't defy me, I own you! You Tamers think you're so perfect, but I'm the one with the Mega Pokémon now! Mega Pidgeot, kill them!"

A truly fearsome bird far larger than any Pidgeot Grace had ever seen swooped around, but a dogged Hawlucha pestered her like an annoying insect.

"I'm not a Tamer," Grace said, advancing on Laevus. "I'm a mother you pissed off."

Grace lunged and punched him in his many chins with all her might. His head spun and he lost his footing, and he crashed to the ground in a heap, a blob of sweaty flesh and fat. Laevus groaned as he rolled and shielded his face, and Grace spit on him where he lay. Fletchling tweeted loudly down at him for good measure.

The conjured snow was getting worse, and Grace heard Calem shout something before a devastating crash racked the room. Grace covered her ears to the noise, and Laevus took the opportunity to scramble away from Grace as he shouted for Mega Pidgeot to come down here and slaughter them. Grace saw the danger as Mega Pidgeot turned the tables on Korrina's Hawlucha and swooped around with an eye on Serena and herself.

"Serena, here!" Grace fished the three Pokéballs from her pocket and shoved them toward Serena.

"My Pokémon!" Serena said.

She quickly selected one of the Pokéballs and released Altaria in a flash of bright white light. The regal blue Dragon stretched his wings and honked in warning as Mega Pidgeot flew by and powered up a

Hyper Beam. When Serena climbed onto Altaria's back, Grace began to panic again.

"Wait, where are you going? We have to get out of here!" Grace said.

"I'm going to fight, Mom."

"But you're weak and injured," Grace protested.

"Serena, don't go," Trevor pleaded with her.

Serena pulled up her sleeve and exposed her ravaged forearm. A thin trickle of blood seeped from the still-clotting wound where Grace had removed the IV. "I promised you I'd get you out of here, Trevor. And I'm tired of sitting by while other people get hurt." She smeared blood from the IV wound on her hand.

"Serena," Grace said.

Serena smiled down at her. "Mom, you're the strongest person I've ever known. You've always done your best to protect me all my life even when it was hard for you, and I love you for it. Now, it's my turn to protect you."

Mega Pidgeot released a Hyper Beam that began to tear up the floor of the cavern. Rhyhorn pawed the floor in distress.

"What're you gonna do?" Trevor asked.

"Laevus wanted my blood for his Mega Evolution experiments. It's time I did an experiment of my own."

Serena pressed her bloody hand to Altaria's back, and the blue Dragon began to transform. The downy white feathers that covered his wings sprouted on his back and head, and he grew a foot taller. The Pokémon standing before Grace now, Mega Altaria, was a wholly different creature than his normal form.

"Stop Mega Pidgeot!" Serena said.

Mega Altaria reared up on his taloned feet, opened his beak, and let loose a pink blast of raw energy as powerful as any Hyper Beam. The bird sensed the danger and swerved to dodge, but only barely. The Moonblast shaved a few feathers off of Mega Pidgeot's tail and hit the wall near the glass ceiling, which shattered under the pressure. Laevus, who had made a break for Mega Swampert for protection, was

struck with one of the thick shards and fell again. Mega Pidgeot, spooked, flew out of the new hole in the ceiling into the night.

"Whoa!" Trevor said.

Serena handed Grace her remaining two Pokéballs, one for Rhydon and one for Sylveon. "Get these to Calem. They'll listen to him."

Grace grabbed Serena's hand in hers and squeezed. "Just come back safe, please."

Serena nodded. "I always do."

Mega Altaria let out a piercing cry, almost melodic, and took to the skies on downy wings. He raced after Mega Pidgeot with Serena on his back, and soon disappeared through the skylight.

Alain had never felt heat so intense before. It burned from the inside out with every shallow breath he sucked in, half delirious and half dead, or near enough to it. It was all he could do to remember not to let go no matter what, for if he fell all would be lost. He had the vaguest sense of falling backwards even as he held on, and he would have thrown up if his body didn't feel like it was melting in his parka.

But all of a sudden, the heat receded abruptly and something cold and sharp smacked him in the face, nearly throwing him off. He wasn't falling backwards, but rising high into the twilit sky. Pinpricks of cold siphoned the heat from his body as they drew invisible cuts in his cheeks.

Snow, he realized.

He tightened his grip on Charizard, now in his black Mega form, as he fought the bracing winter winds to climb higher off the mountainside. It was snowing hard as a maelstrom brewed, and even the light of the full moon was diffused and grey behind the clouds, offering little light as the sun dipped below the horizon to the west. The cold served to snap Alain out of his near heatstroke, and he breathed the frigid air in like a starving man. His sweat froze in his hair and on his face, and he rubbed his eyes. Heliolisk's Pokéball was safely in his pocket, thank god. Nothing could have survived that inferno.

Mega Charizard swooped around, and Alain looked down at the hole in the mountain, one of several scattered around the area. Was Korrina down there somewhere? He had no idea. The hole he'd

escaped from was nothing but a boiling nest of fire now. He could hardly believe he'd made it out before being prematurely cremated. But just as he was getting his bearings back, something burst through the flames and drew them out of the mountain behind it like a magnificent orange cape.

The orange Mega Charizard roared as he emerged from the mountain and, unbelievably, Malva rode on his back unburned and practically glowing under Mega Charizard's light. Her clothes were charred, but her person looked as healthy and fit as ever, better than before even. It was with a sinking feeling of trepidation that Alain decided the flames really could rejuvenate her.

"Still alive?" Malva shouted to be heard over the whipping winds as she tailed Alain through the skies.

Alain lowered himself over Mega Charizard's neck. "Let's go, Mega Charizard. We have to take that other Mega Charizard out fast."

The black Mega Charizard snorted blue fire and spread his wings to catch an updraft, and soon Alain was speeding straight for Malva.

"Dragon Claw!" he commanded.

Mega Charizard's black-scaled claws glowed a baleful red as he raced toward Malva and her mount, ready to gut them both to entrails. But the orange Mega Charizard did not swerve or slow, and his sunburst scales glowed brilliantly with shimmering heat as he powered up a devastating Overheat attack. If Alain could just reach them before they could release the Overheat, he could throw them out of the sky.

Without warning, the black Mega Charizard swerved sharply, his Dragon Claw grasping at nothing but air as the orange Mega Charizard exploded with heat and flame just above. A killer wave of heat hit Alain in the back as the black Mega Charizard dove as fast as he could, and the back of his neck and cheek screamed in pain. Alain cried out and shrank away from the heat, but even as the heat receded, the burning in his face did not. His fingers came away bloody when he touched his cheek, where the proximity to Mega Charizard's Overheat had left him with a bad second-degree burn rash. Blisters welled on his skin and had started to bleed and sting. He was shaking with a fear he had not known in a long time.

I can't get close to that thing, he realized. *He's too hot even for my Mega Charizard!*

Alarmed, Alain touched his hand to Mega Charizard's neck, where his glossy black scales steamed and smoked with a surface burn of his own—the pain he shared with Alain. Above, Malva and her Mega Charizard released the Overheat attack and were making their way back around.

"If we can't hit her head on, then we'll attack from a distance," Alain said. "Let's go! Dragon Pulse!"

The black Mega Charizard roared in challenge and spewed a bolt of red draconian energy at Malva. The orange Mega Charizard responded in kind with the hottest Flamethrower Alain was sure he'd ever seen. Orange met red as the two long-range attacks collided and detonated under their combined heat and pressure.

"Again!" Alain shouted.

The black Mega Charizard fired off another Dragon Pulse, and its orange counterpart launched another Flamethrower. Alain squinted to see through the darkness and the veil of falling snow, and held on as Mega Charizard dove and swooped and spun, all the while attacking almost without pause. Pennons of fire and sparks of deadly draconian energy popped and streamed down around him like some hellish snowfall as the two Mega Charizard chased each other in this deadly dance.

Alain's stomach was slow in keeping up with all of Mega Charizard's aerial maneuvers, and his head spun as he did his best not to get sick with vertigo. The fire that rained down on him whenever the two Mega Charizard got too close to each other stung like a thousand knives in his back, his shoulders, burning through his thick winter parka to the skin beneath. They were soft licks, little tongues that tasted his flesh and disappeared as soon as they had landed, but they kept coming, and even the howling storm winds could not keep them all at bay. Alain shook embers from his hair and hoped the cold would keep him numb to the blistering tendrils of heat that might just be the death of him if this kept up.

If that orange Mega Charizard were still a Dragon descendant, then I could control him, he thought forlornly.

But he wasn't. Mega Evolution was a tricky thing, and this one had caught him completely by surprise. He had heard rumors, but he'd never given much credence to the idea that a Pokémon to have multiple Mega forms. He had only ever heard of Titans Mega Evolving

Charizard, and even then, it was not a common phenomenon by any means. All questions Sycamore would probably be delighted to expound upon, but not at the top of Alain's list of priorities right now. All he wanted to do was figure out a way to stop Malva.

There was a moment in between attacks in which the black Mega Charizard flew right past Malva and her orange Mega Charizard, and Alain reached out with his hand and clawed the air. The black Mega Charizard mimicked his movements and tore into the orange Mega Charizard's thigh with a vicious Slash attack. Alain hadn't even realized he'd overridden Mega Charizard's autonomy to force him to move, it happened so fast, but it worked, and Malva and her orange Mega Charizard dove to get away as fast as possible. He thought he heard Malva cry out in pain, but the storm winds drowned her out and soon the orange Mega Charizard had put considerable distance between them.

Alain stared at his hand. "So we *can* get close to them...just as long as they're not Overheating."

But damn that heat...

If he timed it wrong, if Malva figured out what he was doing, if anything at all went wrong, Alain would probably spontaneously combust when he got too close to the orange Mega Charizard.

That's reassuring, he thought bitterly.

The orange Mega Charizard was still flying and coming in for another attack, this time a Fire Blast tinged with white-hot blue flames that hurtled straight for Alain.

"Fire Blast!" Alain commanded.

The black Mega Charizard spewed its own Fire Blast, a ghastly blue and black column of fire that met the oncoming attack with a roar. The night sky lit up like morning as the Fire Blasts connected and entwined, each trying to consume the other. The streams of fire crescendoed into a great twister, black and blue and orange, that sucked in the blowing snow and glowed like a self-contained sun. Alain shielded his face from the heat to little avail, and still the twister grew larger as neither side let up.

"You wanna play chicken, Malva? Let's play," Alain said. "Hit 'em with Hyper Beam!"

Mega Charizard's black and blue flame breath transformed seamlessly into a scintillating orange bolt of light that crackled as it zigzagged toward the fiery tornado. It cut through the fire and burst through the other side, where Malva and the orange Mega Charizard were still feeding the vortex with fire. Alain could not see what was happening on the other side, but he heard the orange Mega Charizard roar.

He was in the midst of steering Mega Charizard in a deep dive when the winds suddenly picked up and churned even more fiercely than they'd been just a moment ago. The change was so unexpected and violent that Alain was flung from Mega Charizard's back and hurtled to the ground below, twisting and turning. A piercing cry like a bird's cut through the howling winds, and Mega Charizard dove after him. Alain tumbled over himself, hardly able to see which way he was falling as the winds tossed him about.

Something bright cut through the darkness, a flash of something pink, and then he landed on the familiar rough surface that was Mega Charizard's back. The wind was knocked out of him as he clung for dear life, scrambling to stay on Mega Charizard's back with the crazy gale winds doing their best to shake him off again. There was another terrible squawk, definitely a bird, and Alain looked up and caught a glimpse of a Mega Pidgeot, of all the things, in the midst of a super-powered Hurricane attack. The winds were so fierce that they wrested control of the flaming vortex the two Mega Charizard had conjured and dispersed the flames in a devilish rain of fire in every direction.

"Oh, shit!" Alain screamed. "Go, Fly!"

Mega Charizard flew, but even his superior power could not withstand a Mega Pidgeot's Hurricane winds. It was all Mega Charizard could do not to lose control and plummet to the ground or crash into the mountainside. Alain could not even begin to fathom what the hell a Mega Pidgeot was doing out here, but he had to assume that whatever the reason, she was not here to help him out.

Mega Pidgeot screeched and took off flying at a speed unfathomable in this weather, spooked by another blast of pink light that tore a rift through the night sky. Hot on her tail was another Flyer, a Mega Altaria that moved as a blur of cottony white and sang with a soprano scream so bone-chilling that it was almost haunting. He fired off another Moonblast after Mega Pidgeot and soared through the dispersing flames, unbothered by the heat under all those fluffy feathers. Despite the overall desperation of the moment, Alain momentarily lost his grip on this dangerous reality when he saw that

there was someone riding Mega Altaria.

"Serena!" he shouted, not quite believing his eyes.

She heard him over the winds, and they locked gazes briefly for the first time in years. She shouted something back, but he couldn't hear her as Mega Charizard spun with the wind. Before Alain could help himself, he laughed.

She's alive and fighting!

He couldn't believe it. Grace and Calem must have found her, which meant they had to be okay. He could only hope.

"Okay, Mega Charizard," Alain said, feeling invigorated at the sight of Serena alive and well. "It's time to ground Malva. Fly!"

Malva and the orange Mega Charizard had also suffered whiplash in the wake of Mega Pidgeot's surprise Hurricane and were blown way out, but they were steadily making their way back now that the Hurricane had subsided. They were thrown off course again, however, when Serena and Mega Altaria fired off a Dragon Pulse attack intended for Mega Pidgeot, and it was stopped by the latter's Hyper Beam. The ensuing explosion buffeted Malva back, and Alain had to change his course.

One wrong move and Serena or that Mega Pidgeot could take us out as collateral, Alain thought.

Malva seemed to have the same thought and gave them as wide a berth as she could while steadily making her way back toward Alain. There was little chance he would catch her off-guard this time like he had with the Slash attack earlier. He took a deep breath, and the ruined skin on his face flared with pain.

Mega Charizard snarled, perhaps feeling Alain's pain with him. It was the curse of Mega Evolution: phenomenal power beyond imagination tethered to the mortal limits of a mere human. Even if Alain and Mega Charizard could get in range of Malva, his comparative susceptibility to injury would remain a danger to them both.

"*Mega Evolution is merely the manifestation of a deep bond between Tamer and Pokémon. It is proof that we are stronger together than alone,"* Gurkinn had counseled him back at the Tower of Mastery. That seemed a lifetime ago now as frost coated his skin and howling winds jostled him like punches coming from all sides. *"As long as you embrace*

your bond, you can do extraordinary things."

Malva and the orange Mega Charizard were closing in, and Alain could see that he was firing up a Blast Burn attack that would cloak him in flames. He swallowed hard.

"Hey buddy, you ready to do something extraordinary together?"

Mega Charizard roared and spewed blue embers as he raced unafraid straight for the enemy.

Alain grinned. "Okay, then." Hands shaking, he scooted back on Mega Charizard's back and dug his feet into the grooves between his legs and torso for leverage. "Let's take 'em down. Outrage!"

Mega Charizard's midnight scales flared with a sinister red aura as his Dragonsblood quickened. The red haze enveloped Alain as though drawing his strength out of him from somewhere deep inside, and he felt Mega Charizard's fury as if it were his own, the will to tear and rend, to win at all costs together. The mist rose off his shoulders like wings, no longer invisible in this moment as he and Mega Charizard hurtled toward Malva.

He could see her clearly now, crouched low on the orange Mega Charizard's back and framed in fire that invigorated her, eerily beautiful. She shouted something at him that was lost to the winds and the roar of blood in Alain's ear's. The black Mega Charizard roared and charged at his foe without fear, driven by draconian rage, and Alain sat up and pushed with all the strength in his legs.

The crash was bone-crushing and fiery hot as the two Mega Charizard entwined in a tangle of claws and color. The heat was everywhere, but the Outrage aura shielded both Alain and Mega Charizard from instant incineration just long enough for Alain to jump from Mega Charizard's back and make a grab at Malva. The last thing he saw was her shocked face as she recoiled from him, deeper into the fire, but Alain grabbed her jacket and yanked her hard.

And then, they were falling together.

Malva screamed incoherently as she pawed at his chest to get him off, her fiery touch burning through his jacket as she tried to get at his face, but Alain had her in a chokehold from behind and trapped her legs with his as they plummeted. If he was going to die, then he'd sure as hell take her with him. The snowy mountainside rushed to meet them, a downy blanket of white, and for a moment Alain almost

fancied it would be soft and warm, welcoming, when they hit the ground. Malva had other plans.

There was a flash of bright white light, and suddenly Alain was no longer falling, but rather drifting on the winds. Blue light engulfed both Alain and Malva, still held together in the chokehold, and when they hit the ground it was at an angle tumbling over each other in the deep powder. Alain lost his grip on Malva as they rolled, and he skidded alone who knew how far. When he finally came to a stop, he was half buried in knee-deep powder and somehow, some way still alive.

Panting and shaking from the cold—there was snow in his pants, down his shirt, in his hair, *everywhere*—Alain ungracefully staggered to his feet, struggling in the deep powder. How the hell had he survived that fall? He looked up and saw both Mega Charizard still dueling, now rider-less, in a dance of fire and fury. They tumbled together, black on orange, and clawed and ripped and burned each other in an effort to get the upper hand. Alain cried out and hugged his flank where a fresh gash opened up courtesy of his bond with Mega Charizard. He could only hope his Pokémon was giving Malva's just as difficult a time.

Malva herself had landed several yards away, also still alive. The reason why soon became apparent. Her Delphox, glowing blue with Confusion, helped her stand with one paw and held a flaming torch in the other. She must have saved them both when Alain wouldn't let go.

Ironic much. He could have laughed.

Malva, however, did not look to be in a joking mood as she glared daggers at him across the snowdrift. "You have a death wish, Alain?" she said.

"Believe me, you bring it out of me," he said.

"What's the point of all this, anyway?" she shouted to be heard over the storm. "What are you even risking your life for? You're not with Team Flare anymore, so why bother?"

"I could ask you the same thing," Alain said. "Why bother kidnapping an innocent girl? You've already mastered Mega Evolution, clearly." He gestured to the sky above, where their Mega Charizard were still engaged in a bloody aerial battle.

"You're dodging the question," Malva retorted.

"Oh, yeah? And what're *you* doing?"

Malva bared her teeth in a snarl and produced another Pokéball from somewhere. Talonflame materialized in a whorl of light and fire and hovered just over her, impervious to the snow that melted when it came within a few inches of his shimmering red wings.

"I'm repaying a debt," Malva said. "Too bad you'll have to die along the way. Fire!" she ordered her Pokémon.

"Shit!" Alain dug around in his snow pants pocket for Tyrantrum's Pokéball, but he was too slow to avoid Delphox's Mystical Fire. It took the shape of a snarling Dragon's maw and crunched down on the snow Alain had buried himself in, knowing he would not escape unscathed. The snow around him melted as he scrambled to safety, but the fire bit into his calf and sent lancing pain up his leg that made him stumble and cry out. Above, the black Mega Charizard roared in agony, but Alain was too preoccupied with his own situation to observe what was happening up there.

He managed to find Tyrantrum's Pokéball and threw it, and the enormous dino-Dragon appeared with a low thud in the powder-soft snow beside him. Talonflame screeched at the new threat, and Tyrantrum answered with a full-bellied bellow of his own that would have sent lesser men running for the hills. Malva, of course, was neither a man nor lesser in any sense of the word. She was just fucking pissed.

"Tyrantrum!" Alain shouted.

The prehistoric Pokémon did not need much encouragement to locate the enemy and wreak havoc. Tyrantrum lowered his head and flared with red draconian energy as he Dragon Rushed Malva and her Pokémon. Delphox protected herself by Teleporting, but Malva was a bit too slow and was knocked sideways when Tyrantrum grazed her. Talonflame flew high and avoided the attack altogether, and Alain took the opportunity to position himself behind Tyrantrum, who shook out his massive head and shed a ton of snow from his feathered collar, unfazed. If Alain could just get to Malva himself, he could subdue her and take out her Mega Charizard all at once.

"Serena's my friend," Alain said, resuming the previous conversation. "You kidnapped her. It's that simple."

"Oh, how *noble*," Malva spat. She was clutching her left shoulder, and her arm hung useless at her side where Tyrantrum had hit her. "A

chivalrous Dragon. It's so ironic that it's just *sad*."

"Talking about chivalry," Alain said, "why are you helping Laevus? I know he's your brother, but the Malva I remember had standards."

Malva had always been a powerful Ignifera and proud of her power, both when Alain was her ally and now as her enemy. He could not imagine a Malva who risked her life for anyone she deemed lesser than herself, especially a skuff. After what she'd done to Serena and Calem, he could not imagine her having even a shred of compassion for anyone but herself. No, it had to be something else. There had to be something in it for her.

"You would never risk yourself for a skuff," Alain taunted her. "Even if he is family. I know you, Malva. You're not a good person."

Malva did not like this line of questioning, and it showed. "Fuck you, Alain! You know *nothing*! Talonflame!"

Talonflame swooped in aglow with embers as he prepared to Flare Blitz Alain into next Tuesday, but Tyrantrum was there to intervene with a Head Smash and rammed the poor bird. Talonflame squawked in agony, and Malva recalled him to his Pokéball before he could hit the snow.

It was one on one now, and Tyrantrum was more than ready to chow down on Delphox as soon as he got the chance. He was already salivating and dripping thick globs of drool into the snow that froze on contact. There was a moment of hesitation, silence before the fall, and then Malva screamed, "Psychic!"

Delphox waved her flaming stick and unleashed a terrible wave of telekinetic energy capable of crushing bone and twisting innards without ever laying a finger on the foe.

"Dragon Pulse!" Alain shouted.

Tyrantrum unleased a devastating bolt of red draconian power that cut through the Psychic attack and set off a chain of explosions as the energy mingled. Alain ran straight into the middle of it all, his sights set on Malva. She was not expecting him to join the fight himself, and she turned to run. But Alain lunged and tackled her to the ground in a flurry of snow and let loose with his fists. He landed one, two, three punches to the gut and face before Malva caught his gloved hand in hers and squeezed his wrist. Alain screamed as her heat seeped into him like venom, and she threw him off her. He landed in the snow,

clutching his burned hand to his chest, and Malva groaned beside him as she tried to get away.

Tyrantrum was busy trying to Crunch Delphox in half, but the wily vixen was quick with her Teleports and just a little too fast for the big dino-Dragon. Alain rolled onto his side and tried to sit up, but the pain in his wrist was otherworldly. Was this what it had been like for Calem, except a thousand times worse? Tears blurred his vision as the agony overwhelmed him, and he almost blacked out.

He thought he must have blacked out momentarily, because the next thing he knew, Mega Altaria had landed in the snow beside him glowing red with draconian energy, and Serena was helping him up.

"Alain!" she said. "Oh my god, are you okay? Please say something!"

"Ughhh," Alain groaned.

She helped him stand up straight, and his vision adjusted. The falling snowflakes chilled his eyelids and got stuck in his lashes as he blinked. Malva had gotten to her feet a few yards away, bleeding and hunched as she clutched her middle like she might break in two. Her Charizard, no longer Mega Evolved, had landed near her, also looking worse for wear as he absorbed her pain, and shielded her protectively with his leathery blue wings.

Alain's own Charizard, also back in his natural state, was also on the ground and snarling as he eyed Mega Altaria warily and cradled his claw to his chest, the same one Malva had burned on Alain. Just having him here gave Alain a surge of energy, and he reached for him. Charizard was warm to the touch and still standing, the bastard. Strong as a Tauros. He bared him teeth and leaked black smoke from his nostrils as he circled protectively around Alain in spite of his obvious pain.

"Serena," Alain found his voice. "Look at you, all grown up."

Serena looked worse for wear and terribly gaunt, but she was in better shape than Alain at this point. Over her shoulder a ways off, Alain saw a dark heap in the snow that he assumed must be the remains of Mega Pidgeot. She was no longer moving. Serena's eyes shone with unshed tears as she took Alain's good hand in hers after so long.

"We have to get you to a doctor," Serena said. "And I have to help Calem and the others who came here with you. They're still fighting inside."

"I..." Alain trailed off as he noticed Malva still standing. She was trying to back away discreetly. "No," Alain said. "I have to finish this."

"What? Alain, it's over," Serena said.

"No, it's not." Alain tore out of her grasp and advanced on Malva. "Charizard!"

Alain's Charizard was quick to follow him and snarled in warning. Malva's Charizard crawled in front of her to defend, and Alain smirked as he held out his hand. As a regular Charizard, he could easily control the beast.

"Stop," he commanded.

Malva's Charizard froze where he stood, jaw opened where he had prepared to fire off a Flamethrower at Alain in defense of his master. Malva gasped and backed up.

"Alain!" Serena entreated him.

"Hey, Malva," Alain said, ignoring Serena. "Wanna play a game of chicken?"

"Titan scum!" Malva spat.

Her own Charizard rose and turned on her, bending to Alain's will, and snarled aggressively. This was it, victory in his grasp. He could end Malva now with her own Pokémon and get revenge for Serena and Calem both, set things right. He raised his hand, and Malva's Charizard spread his wings.

"No!" Serena screamed, jumping in between Alain and Malva.

What happened next was something Alain would never forget, for he'd never experienced anything like it before. One moment, he had complete control over Malva's Charizard, the beast's Dragonsblood quickening as he called to it, just like with all Dragons. No Dragon or Dragon descendant could defy a fully-realized Titan, after all. But the next moment, that control was gone, severed as though cut with a knife. Serena's hand was fisted around thin air, and the harder she squeezed, the more Alain could feel his control over Malva's Charizard waning until there was nothing left.

"I said, no," Serena said, squeezing her fist tight.

"What're you doing?!" Alain demanded. He tried reaching for Malva's Charizard again, but it was as though there was an invisible wall separating them that he could not penetrate. Malva's Charizard regained himself and bowed his head to Malva as he positioned himself in a defensive stance to protect her.

"I can see your heartstrings," Serena said. "I can see you trying to control Charizard, but I won't let you."

Alain could not believe it. In just a simple act of defiance, Serena had severed his control over a pseudo-Dragon that by rights could *not* defy him when he gave an order. It was unconscionable, and yet it was happening.

"Magus," he said, as if in a daze.

Of course, he remembered from those lessons he'd learned as a child growing up under the Apep Dynasty's tutelage. Beware the Magi, they'd said, for they alone have the power to break a Titan's control. But Alain had dismissed it along with all the others. After all, there were no Magi left, not for hundreds of years. The Magi, who had once threatened the Titans as the superior race of Tamers on earth had long ago died out, never to be seen again. Until now.

"I won't let you kill her," Serena said. "I'm sorry, but I won't."

Alain stared at his hand, the hand that had stopped a rampaging Goodra, that had calmed Tyrantrum in his blackest fits of rage, that had given him the power to Mega Evolve Charizard into his ultimate form—completely useless against a Magus's power.

Malva didn't waste the chance, and when Delphox slipped away to join her, she recalled her Charizard and laid a hand on Delphox's shoulder.

"...I'm sorry, Serena," she said.

But before Serena or Alain could respond to that, Delphox Teleported both Malva and herself. They were gone, vanished into thin air.

Alain stood there in the falling snow, dumbfounded and furious and hurting, and fell to his knees as he stared at his dominant right hand.

Useless.

"Alain," Serena called to him, sinking down into the snow and placing

her hands on his shoulders.

He looked up at her, those endless blue eyes he remembered as if in a dream. She'd always been special, Serena. Lonely, like him, but different. More.

"*It's okay to be different,"* he'd confided in her all those years ago.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I couldn't let you kill her."

What did it matter, really? There was so much in this world that Alain didn't know, so much he'd gotten wrong. Maybe it would always be like that. Maybe he would never really know, never really be right. Maybe that was okay. Serena was alive and here and talking to him. Maybe that was enough. Whatever she'd done to him, maybe it was just tomorrow's mystery to solve.

"Serena," he said, touching her face with his good right hand.

She leaned into his touch, and he realized she was crying. "I thought I'd never see you again."

Despite himself, Alain smiled. "Oh, come on, now. We both know you could always find me so easily."

She laughed through her tears and embraced him. She was so small in his arms, so frail, and yet so much stronger than she looked. She'd defeated him, after all.

"You really are different," he said.

Mega Altaria cooed, a light and lofty note that was somehow beautiful even in this bleak winter night. He lowered his head between them and nudged Serena affectionately.

"Come on," Serena said, helping Alain stand. "We have to help the others. They're still fighting Laevus's Mega Pokémon."

So that's what happened.

Sycamore's theory had been right. Somehow, Laevus the skuff had figured out how to use Mega Evolution. Mega Pidgeot's corpse half buried in the snow was proof enough of that.

"Yeah," Alain said. "Let's go get them and get the hell out of here."

Serena smiled and mounted Mega Altaria, but Alain didn't let go of

her hand.

"Hey," he said, squeezing gently. "I'm sorry I left without saying goodbye."

She shook her head. "You can make it up to me all you want later."

She really has grown up.

"Right, yeah. We should go."

Alain recalled Tyrantrum, who was starting to complain about the cold and snow as he paced uncomfortably, and mounted Charizard. He had seen better days, but he could still fly without any problems. Deciding to cut his losses, Alain soaked his hand in the blood still seeping from the gash in his side and Mega Evolved Charizard once more. When they were all ready, Alain and Serena took off into the night sky and headed back toward the mountain lab, afraid of what might be waiting for them.

Calem was on the ground and gasping for breath in the wake of Mega Swampert's Earthquake. It seemed that the gloves were off, and Mega Swamper did not care about the damage he did to the mountain base anymore. Laevus, limping as he fought off the pain of the glass shard that had taken him in the leg, shouted for him to kill them all, unconcerned about the structural integrity of the base. He was ready to bury them all, himself included, if it meant the deaths of his enemies.

We have to get out of here!

Serena had broken a hole in the glass ceiling and chased off Mega Pidgeot, much to Calem's relief, and now the storm raging outside raged in here, as well. It was also a way out if only Calem and the others could Fly out. Staraptor could carry him, but she could not carry Wulfric and Korrina, too. Korrina, in any case, did not seem to want to leave just yet as she left Mega Lopunny to Mega Blaziken and went after Laevus. Only Mega Swampert's Earthquakes kept her from her target, and only Hawlucha kept her from getting buried alive as he smashed through rocks flying through the air that would have otherwise hit Korrina.

"We have to go!" Calem shouted at Wulfric. "This whole cave is gonna collapse!"

Wulfric had recalled Avalugg and watched as Mega Abomasnow fought Mega Swampert, firing off Ice Beams to keep the beast at bay. "You're right about that. I reckon we don't have much time left."

Way to be helpful, Calem thought bitterly.

Aegislash's shield was cracked and no longer viable as a defense mechanism, something that had never happened before. These Mega Pokémon were a power beyond anything reasonable, without a doubt. Bisharp remained close to Calem's side, but she too looked nervous as the cave was beginning to collapse.

What the hell are we supposed to do?!

"Calem!"

Calem whirled at the familiar voice and found Grace racing toward him with Rhyhorn in tow. A boy Calem didn't recognize was riding Rhyhorn and looked like he might fall off at any moment.

"Grace!" Calem said, rushing to meet her. "You're okay!"

"Yes, I found Serena," Grace said, out of breath.

"I saw. That was her on Altaria, right?"

Grace nodded. "Mega Altaria now, apparently."

When did Serena learn Mega Evolution?

She never ceased to amaze him. But she was alive and okay, and that was enough. Klefki was with Grace and jingled happily to be reunited with Calem.

"Serena went after that Mega Pidgeot," Grace explained.

"I saw. Grace, we have to get out of here. You still have Professor Sycamore's Pidgeot, right? Flying might be our only option, and Serena gave us a way out."

Grace was very pale with fear, but she nodded resolutely. "Yes, I do. And you have Staraptor."

"Yeah, the only problem is Wulfric and Korrina. We can't carry them both," Calem said. "Damnit!"

Mega Blaziken was finally wearing down Mega Lopunny in what

looked like a cornering tactic, but Mega Lopunny jumped suddenly and kicked Mega Blaziken with all her might, lightning fast. Mega Blaziken screeched in pain and recoiled, and Calem watched as Korrina lost her footing and fell, clutching her shoulder where Mega Blaziken had been hit.

"Take out that goddamned Mega Swampert already!" Korrina shouted back at Calem.

She then hauled herself up and ran to help Mega Blaziken.

"I..." Calem said.

Mega Swampert roared as he beat his mighty fists together and prepared to initiate yet another Earthquake.

"Crap, she's right," Calem said. "But I only have a sword and no way to defend myself!"

Grace shoved something at Calem, and he took it instinctively. They were two Pokéballs with heart stickers on them, ones he recognized instantly.

"Serena sends her regards," Grace said.

Calem clutched the Pokéballs in hand, already thinking of a strategy that might not end with his death. "Thanks, Grace."

Klefki hovered just in front of Calem ready for his direction as he faced down Mega Swampert, and Calem tossed out Serena's Pokéballs. In a flash of light, an aloof Sylveon and a beastly Rhydon coalesced on either side of Klefki, who jingled excitedly at being reunited with his companions after so long apart.

"Sylveon, Rhydon," Calem said.

The two Pokémon eyed him askance like they did not like what they saw.

"I know I'm not your trainer, but Serena needs your help, and so do I. So help me, please. We have to take out that Mega Swampert!" Calem entreated the two Pokémon.

Rhydon growled low and guttural, but he was quick to comply. Rhydon had always liked Calem since he was just a Rhyhorn. Sylveon, however, flicked his pink tail dismissively.

"Sylveon, please!" Calem said. "I wouldn't ask if it wasn't for Serena."

"Sylveon, you better help us or I swear to god, I'm never cleaning your litter box again," Grace threatened.

Sylveon just stared at Grace blankly like he didn't recognize this peon making idle threats. Bisharp moved to stand with Rhydon and brandished her bladed fists at Mega Swampert. Calem poised Aegislash's blade to strike.

"Okay, guys, give it everything you got!" he ordered.

Klefki jingled a war tune, and Rhydon bellowed as he smashed the ground in an Earthquake of his own. The ground split and a fissure opened up under Mega Swampert. The huge mud fish struggled to stay above ground and spat out a Hydro Pump at Rhydon, who took the attack head on like a champ. Rhydon roared as he was pushed back under the water pressure and dug his claws into the ground to try to stop. Bisharp took advantage of the moment and jumped to Night Slash Mega Swampert to ribbons. But out of nowhere, Mega Lopunny leaped to the rescue and High Jump Kicked Bisharp in the face. Bisharp when down hard.

"Bisharp!" Calem said, running to her aid.

He came in swinging with Aegislash, but Mega Lopunny was agile and smart, and she jumped clear of Aegislash's Sacred Sword attack. Calem bit through his tongue and tasted blood as he cleaved the ground, completely missing his target, only to look up and see Mega Lopunny closing in with another High Jump Kick that would shatter his spine. He tugged at Aegislash, trying to pry her free from the stone ground, but it was taking too long. He screamed.

A dazzling blast of pink light shot forth and rammed Mega Lopunny as she came crashing down, knocking her off course and into the far wall. Sylveon, smoking pink, landed next to Calem as silent as the grave, his claws bared and his tail a pink lash that sliced the air like he was personally offended that he had been forced to intervene.

"Damnit, Sylveon," Calem said as he finally pried Aegislash out of the ground. "A little warning next time."

Sylveon crouched down ready to attack again as Mega Lopunny recovered, but Korrina's Mega Blaziken ran across the room and smashed Mega Lopunny's face in with a vicious Sky Uppercut that sent the overgrown rabbit flying until she crashed into a stainless steel lab

table. She did not get up again.

"Calem!" Grace called.

"Stay back!" Calem said as he wielded Aegislash once again and ran to help Rhydon.

Rhydon was engaged in a battle of brute strength with Mega Swampert as the two of them arm wrestled each other to the ground. Calem leaped with Aegislash and came down hard.

"Iron Head!"

Mega Swampert saw what Calem was doing and unleashed another Hydro Pump and point-blank range. Rhydon roared in distress as he was blown back and swept away by the powerful jet of water, but Calem managed land a hit on Mega Swampert's back that cut deep.

"Calem, stand back!" Wulfric shouted as he and Mega Abomasnow ran to help.

Mega Abomasnow unleashed an Ice Beam that coated everything in the vicinity in a thin layer of frost, including Calem. Only Klefki's Crafty Shield at the last minute protected him from the worst of Mega Abomasnow's attack, and Calem fell to his knees as he watched the icy bolt rip into Mega Swampert. The huge mud fish began to freeze where he stood and struggled to break the ice, but Bisharp was there on her last hurrah to beat him down again with a well-aimed Night Slash to the back. Bisharp's bladed fists moved in a blur of silver as she pummeled Mega Swampert from behind, slashing and gutting as the ice spread like a cancer. Mega Swampert roared in agony, and in one final push, he slammed his meaty fists into the ground and set off another Earthquake.

Grace screamed as the ground gave out from under her, and Sylveon had to Tackle her to safety before she was buried alive. All around Calem, the cavern was beginning to collapse after so many Earthquakes. The hole Serena had opened up was growing larger as chunks of rock fell from above. This place would soon be buried.

"We have to get out of here!" he shouted back at Grace and Wulfric.

Grace was in shock, but she recovered quickly and released Sycamore's Pidgeot. The bird was startled as he took in his perilous surroundings and squawked in distress.

"Korrina!" Calem shouted.

But Korrina was traversing the rapidly deteriorating cavern on unsteady legs. Laevus saw her coming and turned tail to run. Calem swore and ran after Korrina. Whatever she was doing, she needed to stop so they could get the hell out of here.

"Korrina!" Calem shouted again.

Korrina had caught up to Laevus, who was limping pathetically as he tried to escape. His arms had turned black with rot, and the Mega Stone shards embedded in them pulsed with darkness. He was drooling profusely.

"Not so fast, asshole!" Korrina said.

Laevus grabbed the nearest object to him in his defense—a centrifuge—and flung it at Korrina. She was forced to duck to avoid it, but it didn't slow her down much. She caught up to Laevus, grabbed him by the back of his collar, and slugged him hard in the jaw. He went down hard and squealed like a stuck Grumpig.

"You bitch!" he shrieked.

"Yeah, that's right," Korrina said, "I'm a real bitch. And this bitch is gonna smash your face in, you fucking psycho."

Laevus cried out as he attempted to get away, but Korrina stomped her foot over his wounded leg where the glass shard had struck him, and he convulsed in agony.

"You killed Lucario!" she spat. "I'm going to *crucify you*!"

"Korrina!" Calem shouted as he finally caught up with her.

She put out a hand. "Not now, Calem. This asshole's gonna pay for what he did. There are consequences to his actions, and I've got them right here." She grabbed Laevus by the collar and got right in his face.

"Tamer bitch!" he spat in her face. "You're not better than me! I'm the greatest scientist who ever lived! I made Mega Evolution possible for everyone!"

"You're *nothing*," Korrina snarled. "All you did was hurt people and Pokémon. You think you're so oppressed because you're a skuff? My mother was a skuff, you fucking shit stain! And she fought every day

of her life to protect me even though she knew she wasn't strong enough in the end! What the fuck have you done to help people, anyway?!"

Laevus sputtered as he tried to get away. "I will show the world my discovery! You Tamers are not invincible! You can be beaten at your own game, and I can prove it!"

Korrina punched him again and dropped him on the floor. By then, the cave was really coming down.

"Korrina, we have to get out of here *now*!" Calem entreated her.

"Calem!"

Serena swooped down on Mega Altaria. Alain and his black Mega Charizard were not far behind.

"Serena!" Calem said, on the verge of tears at the sight of her.

Serena landed and leaped off Mega Altaria's back. She ran to Calem, and they embraced as the walls fell around them.

"Oh my god, Serena," he sobbed, unable to hold back his tears.

"There's so much," Serena said, gasping for breath as she choked on her own tears. "So much to say, but we have to get out of here."

They parted, and Grace and Trevor and Wulfric joined them. Alain dismounted from Mega Charizard and ran to Korrina's side.

"Korrina," he said, holding her close.

She said nothing as she hugged him back. Mega Blaziken hovered beside them, his fiery mane magnificent and terrible all at the same time as he looked down on them.

"Folks, I think it's high time we said a-doo," Wulfric said.

"What?" Alain said.

"He means we need to leave!" Grace said, climbing onto Pidgeot's back. She helped Trevor and Darumaka on after and seated them in front of her so they would not fall.

"Come on, Korrina," Alain said, dragging her toward Mega Charizard.

Calem recalled all his Pokémon and released Staraptor, while Serena helped Wulfric climb onto Mega Altaria behind her.

"Goodness, a man could fall asleep on this bird!" Wulfric said as he settled into Mega Altaria's downy back feathers.

"Let's just get out of here already!" Calem shouted as he urged Staraptor to Fly.

Serena and Mega Altaria took off first, followed by Mega Charizard, then Pidgeot and Staraptor. Calem looked back as Staraptor gained altitude and saw Laevus crawling over the floor toward the back of the room, still alive.

I hope you get buried alive, you sick fuck, he thought.

He didn't stick around to see it, though, as Staraptor's powerful wings pulled him free of the collapsing cavern. Dawn was breaking by now, though the storm raged on. Calem ducked low on Staraptor's back and trusted the bird to follow the group to safety, wherever that was.

When they finally touched down in the snow to the east, Calem could hear crashing sounds in the distance—the underground lab was caving in on itself and burying everything inside it. The storm was going strong, and the winds were cruel and cold out here. Snow stung his cheeks like needles in his skin even when he pulled up his hood. A column of snow burst like a geyser as another cavern in the mountain collapsed, and Staraptor squawked in alarm.

"It's over," Grace said as she joined him.

She was watching the destruction with wide eyes, almost sad, and he wondered what she thought of all this.

"Yeah," he said.

Grace laid a hand on his shoulder and squeezed reassuringly. "Calem, thank you."

"I... What?"

"You never gave up," Grace said. "Even when I...when I blamed you for what happened, you never gave up. I'm sorry I ever doubted you. I was so wrong." She took in a shaky breath and forced herself to look him in the eye. Fresh tears glistened in her brilliant blue eyes, blue like Serena's. "Thank you for helping me find my daughter."

Calem did not know what to say to that, and he still did not know what to say when Grace hugged him. He was freezing cold with a Ghost sword strapped to his back and weary like he'd never been before, and he did not know what to say to this woman. All he could do was hug her back, that seemed like the right thing to do.

"None of this would've been possible without you, Grace," Calem said softly. "This was your victory."

She shuddered, and when they parted, he saw that she was smiling and laughing.

"Hey!" Serena jumped on them both, an arm around each, and hugged them close. "Oh my god, I missed you both so much!"

"Serena," Calem said.

"Thank you for coming for me," she said as she pressed her cold face into his neck and smiled. "I knew you'd find me."

Calem felt his face heat in a blush.

"Calem was very brave," Grace said.

Klefki crashed the party with his infernal jingle-jangle and buzzed around Serena's and Calem's heads, wanting attention. Serena laughed, and Klefki was dazzled by the sound.

"Hoi!" Wulfric shouted, drawing everyone's attention.

Something was coming from the east through the storm, flapping and floundering in the winds. Calem squinted to make it out.

"Is that...?" he said.

"Delibird!" Grace said. "She made it!"

"Hooooi! Over here!" Wulfric shouted.

Delibird flew to them through the storm, and close behind were people, a lot of people. And Pokémon, too. There was Piloswine and Beartic and Crabominable, even the smaller Glalie and Jynx, and all carried supplies or cleared the path for the humans to make safe passage. A big man who bore an uncanny resemblance to Wulfric led the charge.

"Hooooi!" he shouted, waving.

"Looks like our backup's here, guys and gals!" Wulfric said.

"Un-fucking-believable," Korrina said. "Remind me never to say a bad word about Crystallos ever again."

"Duly noted," Alain said.

Calem didn't let go of Grace and Serena even as the rescue team arrived. It was over, finally, and he wasn't about to waste another minute of his life without the people who mattered most.

I am aware that Tyrantrum does not learn Dragon Rush, but in the same way that Wigglytuff doesn't learn Moonblast, I'm vetoing Game Freak's stupid logic and doing what I think makes sense for the Tamerverse.

Also, there will be an epilogue to wrap things up after this. Remember to review if you read and enjoyed this crazy fight chapter. I really love hearing from you guys, and it's so easy to do!

11. Epilogue

Wanderer
Disclaimer: I don't own Pokémon

EPILOGUE

The warm orange light of a crackling fire cast a jeweled glow on the dark wood walls and matching tables, soft and inviting. The smell of tonight's special, a rich beef bourguignon slow-cooked over the last day and night, permeated *Le Chalet*'s cozy dining room and warmed the place even on this chilly winter night. Siebold had seen off the last of tonight's dinner guests an hour ago, and his bartender and assistant manager had just clocked out after cleaning their stations and counting out the tips. Siebold had a glass of thirteen-year-old Merlot keeping him company as he sat at the long lacquered bar and reviewed the accounts. It had been a good season, all things considered. Winter was always the slowest season with people preferring to snuggle up at home rather than brave the sleet and freezing rain that plagued the City of Light this time of year.

Siebold was in the midst of tallying the budget for root vegetables when something hit the glass on the entrance door and jingled the bell. Startled, Siebold accidentally knocked over his glass of wine and spilled it all over the accounting book.

"Damnit," he swore, slipping out of the bar stool to keep the dark red liquid from staining his trousers.

There was another thud against the door, and he went to check it out. Probably some drunkard who saw the light on and thought he'd made it home. In this cold, Siebold could not exactly blame him, but he couldn't have anybody passed out in a pool of their own vomit at the front door to his Michelin star restaurant. Cautious by nature, Siebold ran a hand over the four Pokéballs he always kept on his person, force of habit. But when he got to the door and unlocked it, it was not a pool of vomit he found, but a pool of blood. And instead of a disoriented drunkard, he found Malva in a tattered white parka stained with blood and soot. Delphox was hunched over her and glowing blue.

"Malva! What happened to you?" he demanded, reaching for her.

She was hot to the touch, too hot, and he winced when her bare hand

burned right through the sleeve of his button-up. Her trademark sunglasses were nowhere to be seen, and her pupils were dilated as she suffered obvious pain and exhaustion. She looked like she'd just been in the fight of her life and lost.

"Siebold," she said weakly. It was so wrong. Nothing about Malva had ever been weak, and it infuriated Siebold to see her reduced to this, whatever the reason.

Without a word, he scooped her up and carried her inside. Delphox watched him like a hawk and followed. She had never really trusted Siebold, perhaps a natural reaction to a Syreni like him, but she did not try to stop him as he carried Malva upstairs to the apartment where he lived above the restaurant. She clung to his sleeves, burning them with a light touch and searing his skin red until it steamed. He got her onto the immaculately-made bed in his room.

Quickly, Siebold stripped Malva down to her undergarments to better tend to her. She was bleeding from multiple wounds, the one on her leg particularly bad. Her shoulder was bruised almost black, and he suspected internal bleeding from blunt-force trauma. Various gashes, bruises, and other surface wounds compounded the damage. She'd lost a lot of blood getting here.

"Siebold," she said in that soft voice that didn't suit her at all. "I'm sorry, I...didn't know where else to go."

"Shh," Siebold said as he dumped her burned clothes in the bin and stepped into the small bathroom. "You can explain later."

He found what he'd been looking for—a bottle of Hyper Potion he'd been holding on to in case of emergencies—and lifted the glass bottle to her lips.

"Drink this," he urged as he cradled her head in his arms.

Malva choked it down, spilling a little on the pillow, and lay back. Once he saw that she'd swallowed it all, Siebold returned to the bathroom and filled a bucket with warm water. He returned with the bucket and a clean washcloth and began to clean the blood and soot from Malva's face and hair. She let him work in silence and watched him for a moment before closing her eyes.

"You're good with your hands," she said.

"I'm good with a lot of things," he said, only half paying attention as

he focused on cleaning her up as best he could. When he got to her leg, he had to cut the legging pants and peel back strips of cloth to see the extent of the damage. Whatever had gotten her had nails as thick around as his fist. It was a miracle her leg hadn't come off at the knee. But the Hyper Potion was already doing its job. The bleeding had slowed to a negligible trickle, and the ripped muscle was starting to knit back together from the inside out. A wound that deep would require stitches, so he dug out an old sewing kit he kept in case of lost buttons and tears, threaded a needle, and got to work.

"I promise I...I'll be out of here as soon as I can walk," Malva said.

"You'll stay in bed until I say otherwise," Siebold said. "You're in no condition to walk anywhere."

Her searing fingers on his wrist startled him, and he accidentally stabbed her with the needle. She hardly flinched at the pain.

"I don't want your pity," Malva said.

Siebold stared, lost in thought. For as long as he'd known Malva, she'd always been very standoffish and private, never wanting anything from him or anyone else. Even treating her to a nice bottle of wine, a good meal, or a gift to show his affection had always been met with suspicion. She didn't need anyone's help, and she would not accept charity or handouts. Earning her trust and affection was nothing short of a Herculean task at every turn. When they talk about the labors of love, Siebold was pretty sure they were talking about Malva. And yet, she had come to him at her most vulnerable when she felt she had nowhere else to go.

"I don't pity you," he said. "Malva, we've been over this."

"This was a mistake," she said, trying to get up.

Her wounds hindered her, and Siebold easily overpowered her. Even her fiery touch could not deter him, immune as he was to her heat. Their skin hissed where she grabbed at him, and steam rose in between them like a veil. Those red eyes, so full of fire, were now wide with fever and fear.

"Malva," Siebold said, tamping down this familiar frustration, "let me help you. Not because I pity you, but because I love you."

She watched him like she might break in two at any moment, on a precipice of something both beautiful and terrible, and she did not

know the difference.

"It's why you came to me," he pressed her. "I'm here for you, and I'm not going anywhere." He took her hand in his and ran his thumb over her knuckles, ignoring the ticklish sting on his fingers where he touched her. "It's okay to need help; I'm here to give it to you. But you have to let me in."

If he didn't know her better, he thought she might start to cry. But this was Malva; tears evaporated before they ever touched her skin, if she even knew how to cry. The heat in her hands receded to a pulsing warmth, pleasant, and she let him push her back on the pillow.

"Fire," she managed. "Bring me fire."

Fire seemed like the last thing that would help, but she looked very serious, so he got up and retrieved a lighter from his dresser.

"Hold it there," Malva said, indicating the deep wounds on her leg.

Siebold hesitated. "Are you sure?"

"Just keep it steady."

Siebold did as he was asked and held the open flame near her mangled flesh. Then, the strangest thing happened. The flames jumped from the small lighter to catch upon her flesh, but instead of consuming it, they seemed to be gobbled up by it. Siebold could only stare in awe as Malva's flesh very slowly rejuvenated, as though the fire itself was the panacea for all her ailments. Flesh knit back together amidst smoke and steam, like magic.

"How...?"

"There are things I haven't told you," she said softly.

"I think I need a drink. I spilled the last one all over this season's bookkeeping account."

Delphox, who had remained on guard this whole time near the door, approached now and kneeled down next to the bed. Her large ears twitched as Siebold got up, though he had not the faintest clue how she could hear a damn thing with all that fur growing out of her ears. Malva whispered something to Delphox, and Siebold slipped out the door to grab a bottle of wine and some glasses.

"Thanks," Malva said, accepting a glass of the Merlot he'd been drinking earlier. She winced as she took a sip. "Tastes like blood."

"Blame whoever did this to you, not the vintage," Siebold said, letting that hang as he sipped.

She did not respond.

"Malva," he tried at length. "Tell me what happened."

"I should go," she said instead. "It's not safe."

"You're always safe with me." Siebold touched her bare shoulder.

"No, you're not safe with *me*."

She shied from his touch, and when she tried to get up, Siebold had a mind to stop her, Delphox be damned. He grabbed Malva by her shoulders and forced her to look at him. Delphox drew her gnarled torch in warning, but a little fire had never scared Siebold. He knew what he was getting in to with Malva from the beginning. Or at least, he thought he had.

"The last time you left here, you said it would be the last time," Siebold said. "And now you're back. Whatever it was, it's done. Over."

"I thought so," Malva said. "But even with Laevus gone, Lysandre won't stop until he finds me."

"Who's Laevus?"

"My brother."

She told him about Laevus and how the unfortunate combination of genius, childhood neglect, and festering hatred had led him down a path of incredible discovery and destruction. She told him about the experiments with the Mega Stones, the plan to defect from Team Flare, and even her own role in kidnapping people for Laevus's experiments. It had all ended as Malva always knew it would, in fire and blood. What she hadn't known was that she would feel this way when it was all over.

"The Magus girl survived, so did the pleb boy. And my brother was probably buried along with his butcher's lab. And I... I'm so...relieved. I'm so tired," Malva said.

Siebold had known from the moment he set eyes on Malva that she

was embroiled in something dark. Team Flare in general was suspected of illegality and black market dealings of all kinds, but no one had ever been able to produce any proof. Maybe they were too afraid to come forward. Maybe the rumors were just rumors. Gym Leader Clemont did everything strictly by the black letter of the law, and without incontrovertible proof of wrongdoing, he would never mete out justice where he did not feel it deserved. A bane and a blessing, depending on one's perspective.

"You loved your brother," Siebold said.

Malva looked at him strangely, like she was hearing her own voice for the first time and unsure whether to trust it. "That creature who died back there wasn't my brother. I knew that, but I still... I didn't want to believe it."

What a mess. Siebold had never even known she had a brother until now. One thing was certain: Malva would not be welcome in Lumiose City any longer. If she had betrayed Team Flare and they knew about it, they would hunt her. This place was not safe for her. Perhaps nowhere was. As though reading his mind, she tried to sit up in bed again.

"I have to leave," she said.

"You're not going anywhere."

"Didn't you hear me? It's not safe with me."

"Then why did you come?" Siebold demanded.

Whatever she'd been through, the battle she'd glossed over in her hasty explanation had taken the life out of her. That, and her time in the White Mountains with the brother who had become someone she no longer recognized right under her nose. Siebold had witnessed the consequences of trauma from his years in the Kalosian Armed Forces, a detail he kept to himself even around those closest to him, and he saw it in Malva now. She struggled to gather her thoughts until finally settling on the only thing that made sense to her.

"You're the only thing that's ever kept me going through all this shit," she said.

Malva rarely spoke of her feelings, a sarcastic tough girl right down to the stereotype. She had never once told him she loved him, and she seldom ever showed it. This, however, came close. Somehow, Siebold

had become the person she landed on when she was beaten and broken. He would put her back together as best he could.

Her cheek was hot to the touch under his palm. He brushed her magenta bangs behind her ear and leaned down over her. "Then I'll keep you going," he said, kissing her swollen lips softly. "But now that you're through this shit, that's the end of it."

Her fingers in his hair tugged insistently as she kissed him back. "There is no end. There never will be for me."

"I get my way more often than not."

"Not with these guys."

He ran his thumb over her lip, and a light curl of steam rose as she breathed against him. "I have a few tricks up my sleeve."

Malva threaded her fingers in his hair and pulled him close for a real kiss. She tasted like smoke and heat and wine, and if he had his way, they would stay like this all night. But he sensed her hesitation, the fear that had followed her here. No place was safe with her, she'd warned him. He pulled away.

"You know I can't stay here," she said.

"I know."

She sat up in bed and fumbled with the lighter again, running her fingers through the small flame. "I need to leave."

"I know. I'll leave with you."

"What? No," Malva said. "What?"

"I'll leave with you," Siebold said again. "Wherever you want to go. I hear the skiing in Sinnoh is world class. Or we could go on a safari through the wild jungles of Hoenn."

Malva shook her head in disbelief. "Slow down. You have a life here, your family's restaurant. You can't just leave."

"It's my life," he said gently. "This place is just a building."

"It's your *family's* place. All your memories of them are here. You don't understand what you'd be giving up."

Siebold smiled for her and wiped a bit of soot from her cheek with his thumb. "I can take my memories with me wherever I go. But you're real and you're here, and this time I don't want to let you disappear again without a trace. I don't want you to leave ever again."

Malva searched his eyes with a kind of misty vulnerability he'd rarely seen on her. Softly, like speaking it aloud might shatter whatever this dream was, she said, "You want me? After everything I've done, you still..."

He held her face in his hands inches from his own. "I wanted you from the moment I met you. I want you today, and tomorrow, and all the days after that for however long we have left. Before you I was fine, just like everyone else living day to day in this rainy grey city. But with you it's like I can see in color for the first time. With you, I feel alive. Of course I want you, Malva. More than anything."

He felt her breathing grow shaky, and she laid her hand over his in a gesture that was as close to affectionate as she was probably ever going to get. "This world is going to burn," she said. "I'll always be running."

"I don't burn," he said, entwining their fingers and watching them steam on contact.

She tugged on his shirtfront and kissed him hard on the mouth. They fell back on the bed together, and if her injuries bothered her, she hid the pain well as she ripped at his clothes to get them off. Her fingers burned holes in his shirt, but he didn't care, eager to feel her skin on his. The only light in the room was from Delphox's torch as she stood by the window and looked down on the empty streets, a silent sentinel. The half-drunk glasses of wine lay forgotten on the nightstand as the lovers entwined among the sheets after so long apart.

Malva lay in Siebold's arms, tangled in the sheets, and for a few moments he was content to listen to her breathing and trace the smooth contours of her back. It would have been marvelous to lie here all night with her, but she was a step ahead of him and always in a rush.

"We have to go," she said all too soon. "It's not safe here."

"No one knows you're here," Siebold protested, tightening his grip around her. "You need to rest."

"Is that what you call it?" she teased. But she extricated herself from his arms all the same.

He didn't miss the wince when she sat up and favored her side. "You're in pain."

"Nothing new. I'll live thanks to you."

She was slowly inching out of bed, and the sheet pooled around her naked hips.

"Does it have to be tonight?" he asked.

She looked back at him over her shoulder, almost contrite. "Yes."

He rubbed his eyes. "All right. Give me ten minutes."

They both got up, and Siebold got to work dressing and packing two bags, one for Malva and one for himself. She didn't keep many belongings here, but he packed what little there was while she cleaned up in the bathroom and changed into clothes that weren't destroyed.

He headed downstairs to retrieve an emergency travel pack he kept ready at all times just in case. It had multiple passports with different aliases, currency enough to start over someplace where no one knew him, a worn cookbook containing his family's recipes accumulated over the years, and other personal memorabilia he could not bear to part with: pictures, letters, family heirlooms, a set of dog tags that was the only proof left of his military training. Anyone who did not know his past may have found his habits odd if not a little disturbing, but his time in the Kalosian Armed Forces had honed a paranoia that would likely never leave him. He grabbed the travel pack, doused the fire in the dining room, and headed back to the stairs. The accounts book soiled with spilled wine still lay open on the bar. He just made it to the stairs when Delphox swooped down past him to the large front window overlooking the street. Malva was right behind her limping down the stairs with both their packs slung over her shoulders.

"What's going on?" Siebold asked.

"They're here," Malva hissed. "Delphox sensed them. Damnit, they were waiting for me to Teleport back here!"

"Who?"

At the window, Delphox growled and brandished her torch. Before

Siebold could get a word in edgewise, Delphox exploded with blue light and the window shattered. A blinding flash illuminated the dark dining room, disorienting, and Siebold reached across the bannister to shield Malva from whatever was coming with his body. The air hissed and popped, and Siebold's throat stung as the air became sour and hard to breathe. The smell of ozone was pungent in the night air that leaked in through the burst window.

The sounds of growling and snarling were the first to reach Siebold's ears as his vision cleared and he regained his bearings. Delphox had leaped out of the window and taken the glass shards with her. Controlling them with Confusion, the fire fox rained broken glass on a Manectric and his trainer that had attacked.

"Delphox!" Malva said, struggling to limp to the window and get outside.

Siebold rushed to her side and held her up by the waist. "Stay behind me."

"Thunderbolt!" a woman's voice ordered.

A polished Magnezone erupted with yellow electricity and lit up the entire block. Street lamps popped and went dark, and Siebold gagged on an acrid breath. Delphox manipulated the electricity with her formidable telekinetic powers, but the surge was strong and devastating in breadth and intensity. Siebold and Malva made it to the window, and he counted no less than ten trainers and as many Electric Pokémon guarding them. The people all wore matching uniforms, blue jumpsuits with copper scale armor meant to conduct their Pokémon's electricity.

Fulmen, he thought with no small degree of trepidation.

Only Delphox stood in between Siebold and Malva and their attackers.

"We're looking for Malva," one of the men said. His Raichu sparked at his side. "Are you her?"

Malva wiped her mouth. "What is this? They're not Team Flare."

Siebold stepped through the broken window and helped Malva out after him. "You're Lumiose Gym trainers," he said, recognizing the starburst on a golden shield that was the Gym's crest carved into their intricate copper mail. "I hope you have a good explanation for why you're attacking my restaurant."

"Destruction of private property is often a natural consequence of a manhunt," said a short young man. The others parted for him. "I would offer my sympathies, but it looks to me like you've been harboring a fugitive, sir."

The short man, blond and baby-faced with round spectacles, would have been a forgettable face on anyone else. But this was not just anyone else.

"Gym Leader Clemont," Siebold said. "I would say it's an honor, but we've already established that you've cost me several thousand in property damage."

Clemont was young, more a boy than a man, but his genius both as a Fulmen and an engineer was known far and wide across Kalos. It was his innovations using electricity that kept Lumiose at the cutting edge of modernization, but it was his rigid and dispassionate attitude about law enforcement that kept its streets clean and its dungeons full—at least until execution day. Mercy was not a word often heard in the halls of Prism Tower, Clemont's Gym and the dungeons below it.

A black and yellow-scaled Heliolisk, his collar tucked away for the moment, stood stock still at Clemont's side. His eyes were wide cerulean and unblinking, and his claws were small but curved like a raptor's. The nails clicked as the creature flexed, a bone chilling sound like the winding of a torture rack.

Clemont ignored Siebold's rudeness and turned to Malva. "Malva, I presume. I've come personally to arrest you on charges of felony theft, aggravated assault, and multiple homicide. As to you," he said to Siebold, "I will have to arrest you on the grounds of aiding and abetting a fugitive from the law. My apologies for the inconvenience."

"Who accuses me?" Malva demanded. "Where's your proof?"

"I have the victim's sworn testimony as to the theft and assault, as well as his organization's cooperation in investigating the multiple homicide charges," Clemont said.

"Lysandre," Malva spat. "Since when is the Lumiose Gym Leader in Team Flare's pocket?"

"I'm here to enforce the law," Clemont said. "Where I receive my information is irrelevant so long as it's sound."

"Your information's coming from a goddamned mob boss!" Malva said.

"Lysandre's the kingpin; I'm just a convenient scapegoat. Don't you fucking stand there and pretend like you don't know anything."

Clemont was completely unmoved by her tirade. "You are to return to Prism Tower with me to await trial and judgment. The penalty for your crimes, if you're found guilty, is death by electrocution."

The way he said it, he may as well have been reading through items on a shopping list. Siebold did not need to know Clemont's reputation to know that there would be no reasoning, no talking a way out of this even to buy time. His Gym trainers and their Pokémon were already advancing.

"Stay back," Malva said to Siebold.

Delphox was a strong Pokémon, but tired from Malva's earlier battling and now up against a small army of Electric Pokémon, including Gym Leader Clemont himself, she stood no chance at all.

"No," Siebold said. "You stay back. I'll handle this."

Malva made to protest, but Siebold had already detached himself from her and began to advance. "Lysandre is the one you want," he said to Clemont. "We're leaving Lumiose. You have my word that Malva will never return to this city again, so let that be enough until you can apprehend the true culprit here."

Heliolisk bared his sharp teeth and hissed in warning.

"Siebold!" Malva said, the anger almost enough to hide the fear in her voice.

"I'm afraid that won't do," Clemont said. "Siebold, yes? You don't need to fear. Your penalty is not death, merely incarceration after trial for a period not to exceed five years."

"Then we're at an impasse," Siebold said. He ran his fingers over the Pokéballs situated at his hip. "Nevertheless, we'll be going now."

Clemont's blue eyes were empty as they stared at Siebold in his polite defiance. "No, you won't be."

As though it bored him, Clemont waved his hand and the other Gym trainers advanced. Siebold moved fast and threw one of his Pokéballs.

"Water Shuriken!" he said.

From the flash of light, a lithe Greninja appeared and melted into the darkness as though they were one. She fired off blades of water faster than the eye could see, three of which hit three Gym trainers and knocked them off their feet. Delphox leaped forward and conjured a Mystical Fire, sensing the threat of battle renewed, and somewhere behind him, Siebold heard Malva shout his name again.

It happened fast. One moment the street was dark and dreary, the next it was alive with deadly light and thunder. Thunderbolts cracked and split the air, and Greninja leaped and spun and avoided the lethal attacks as she fired off Water Shuriken like bullets. They bounced off Magnezone and hit a Zebstrika, but the zebra reared and sparked even as he bled, his temper ignited. Clemont's Heliolisk flared his collar and sparked threateningly.

There was only one way this was going to work, and that was if Siebold moved fast. Backtracking, he threw his other three Pokéballs and shouted commands. A levitating Starmie redirected Magnezone's Thunder with its Psychic powers and channeled them back around to hit the wounded Zebstrika, crippling him. Clawitzer let loose with a Hydro Pump from his enormous pincer that sent a Raichu flying into her trainer and flooded the street. Chaos ensued.

"Electric Terrain," Clemont ordered in his eerie monotone.

Heliolisk burst with static electricity that danced over the slick street drenched from Clawitzer's Hydro Pump and electrocuted anything it touched, but Starmie spun and released a wave of Psychic energy that made the water rise and churn into a sentient electrified water spout. Siebold, meanwhile sliced open his palm on a pocket knife and laid it on the back of his Blastoise, a hulking turtle with scratches and scars on his shell from years of training and battle.

"What the...?" Malva said as she watched Blastoise's Mega transformation for the first time.

Clemont sensed the danger of the situation even as some of his Gym trainers were preoccupied with Starmie's electrified Whirlpool zigzagging in between them. "Heliolisk, Thunderbolt!"

Heliolisk ran at Siebold and the now transformed Mega Blastoise, who was nearly of a height with his trainer thanks to the enormous cannon on his back. But out of nowhere, Greninja swooped in like a blue wraith and Night Slashed Heliolisk from behind. The yellow lizard Pokémon hissed and snapped as he was thrown and wrestled with

Greninja to get the sticky frog off him.

Siebold patted Mega Blastoise on his shell. It had been some time since they'd done this; not even Malva knew about Blastoise or Siebold's military background. Running a restaurant was generally a peaceful business, where the only foes he encountered were the occasional dissatisfied patrons. But Blastoise was as old as he was and his strongest Pokémon since their time in the Kalosian Armed Forces' elite Water Strike Division, and this was an old dance they had perfected many years ago, in another life before all this.

"Don't hold back, Mega Blastoise," Siebold said.

Mega Blastoise sank to all fours and fired up his cannon. Water, drawn from the very air, began to materialize around him in flowing ribbons. Heliolisk Sparked and finally managed to throw Greninja off. The scrappy frog rolled and landed on all fours, smoking from her wounds but still able to fight. She croaked loudly when she saw Mega Blastoise gearing up, and both Starmie and Clawitzer abandoned their posts and retreated as quickly as they could.

"Stop them!" Clemont shouted at his Gym trainers who were scattered thanks to Siebold's Pokémon's relentless combo attacks. "Heliolisk, Thunder!"

Heliolisk jumped to his feet, flared his collar, and released a terrible surge of electricity in all directions. At the same moment, Blastoise fired his ruinous Hydro Cannon at the heart of the Gym forces. The water expanded as it shot forward in a wave and reared up like a wall and came crashing down. Heliolisk's Thunder merged with it and slowed it down, but there was too much water drawn from the atmosphere and combined with Mega Blastoise's own stored water to overcome the ultimate attack.

Seibold raised both hands and brought them down in a harsh arc, and the rest of his Pokémon obeyed the silent command. The ensuing torrent of highly pressurized water, manipulated through Starmie's potent telekinesis, swept through the streets and knocked the Lumiose Gym trainers down, burying them before they could command their Pokémon to retaliate. Like a tidal wave, the Water Pokémon's combined attacks completely overwhelmed Clemont and his team, momentarily drowning them under a turgid river materialized out of nowhere. Electricity sparked as Clemont and his team tried to fight back, but Seibold was already retreating with his Pokémon in the distraction. He took Malva's hand.

"Who *are* you?" she managed, quivering in her shock at the wanton display of power she had never imagined he possessed.

"There are a few things I haven't told you, either," he said as he quickly recalled all his Pokémon but Starmie.

By now, the river was washing away, and Clemont's Heliolisk unleashed a mad Thunder attack that parted the waters enough to save himself and his Gym trainers from truly drowning. More than half of them had been swept away several blocks, no longer an immediate threat.

"I'll tell you all about it later," Siebold said, reaching for Starmie. "Hang on."

"Stop!" Clemont shouted. His copper scale armor was sparking as he conducted Heliolisk's lightning to part the frothing waters. He raised his hands to fire off a Thunderbolt conjured from the electricity he'd redirected and stored through Heliolisk.

Starmie's crimson jewel pulsed with Psychic energy, and in the blink of an eye, it had Teleported Siebold, Malva, and Delphox out of Lumiose City. Clemont's redirected Thunderbolt hit damp cobblestone and ripped a hole in the ground, but there was no trace of them left.

Siebold landed on the dusty earth, his stomach in his throat as it clenched with the emetic effects of vertigo. It had been ages since he'd used Starmie's Teleportation, and his body protested the roller coaster sensation. But the muscle memory returned to him. The lights of Lumiose glittered to the south, miles away from his position somewhere far to the north on Route Thirteen.

"You'll tell me now," Malva said, having endured the sudden Teleportation with a little more grace. She gave him a hand up. Delphox eyed Starmie suspiciously, but Starmie had no face or eyes to speak of and simply hovered a couple inches over the ground, silent and sparkling under the starlight.

"It's a long story," Siebold said. "And one best heard over dinner and candlelight, like all stories." He smiled at her.

Malva looked at him. "What you just did..." she said. "They'll hunt you now, too."

"Then we better get a healthy head start. I have a boat in Coumarine City standing by ready to sail anywhere we want to go. Just say the

word."

She shook her head, disbelieving. The man she'd known was only a small part of him. But he could see the light in her eyes, that twinkle of relief. Maybe a part of her had always known they were the same, fighters who did not quite fit with the rest of society when it dragged them out of their carefully crafted shadows. Siebold had made a valiant effort for years, a promise to his aged parents and to himself, to leave that life of fighting and secrecy behind and do something that would make people smile, something human. He'd enjoyed it, loved it even. But the restaurant was just a building; Malva was one of a kind. The choice was an easy one.

"I hear Alola is beautiful this time of year. The Ignifers of Akala Island train around an active volcano. I've never seen a volcano before," Malva said.

Siebold smiled and slipped a hand around the back of her neck to draw her in. "Alola? I've always wanted to try their famous malasada."

Despite herself, Malva pressed her lips to his in a gentle kiss. He felt her tears evaporate upon his cheeks as she smiled into him.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Siebold slung her arm over his shoulder, and Starmie's jewel pulsed like a heart as it channeled its powers of Teleportation once again. In the blink of an eye, they were gone.

"Category: Famous Pokémon Trainers," Imelda read from the card she drew from the deck. "This Volucris currently serves as the youngest Imperial General in Sinnoh's Lotus Order."

Serena sipped the protein smoothie one of the nurses had brought her to help her regain her strength. "The Lotus Order?" she asked.

"Their a group of five Tamers, the Imperial Generals, who're s'posed to be, like, the strongest ones in Sinnoh because they protect the Imperatrix," Korrina said. They were on a team together for Trivia Tuesday, which Wulfric had had Imelda set up in Serena's hospital room even though today was techinically Saturday. "You know, the supreme leader of Sinnoh."

Serena didn't know any of that, but Korrina being a Gym Leader meant she probably knew a whole bunch of things Serena didn't know.

"So, do you know the answer?" Serena asked.

Korrina made a face. "Well, international relations aren't my forte..."

Across the way, Grace was standing near Alain's bed, where he was being fed by no less than three IV tubes with various Potions and healing elixirs to see to his many wounds. They were also conferring in hushed tones as they tried to figure out the answer to Imelda's trivia question.

"I got it," Calem said, while Wulfric looked on from his bed with a wide grin. "It's Imperial General Aaron."

Imelda beamed. "That's correct! Okay, so that's another point for Team Ice 'n Slice."

"Oh my god, what even is that name?" Korrina said loudly. "And Calem, you didn't even know the answer. I bet Wulfric told you to say that."

"We're on the same team, that's how it works," Calem said. "Don't be a sore loser, Korrina."

Klefki, who had decided to turn traitor and support Calem in the trivia contest over Serena, jingled happily. Sylveon, who had been curled up on Serena's lap, lifted his head and stared his murder stare at the duplicitous Klefki. Darumaka was busy rolling around on the floor around the beds, curious about all these new people. Trevor was undergoing multiple operations due to his severe injuries and the poisoning he'd endured from the Mega Stone, but thanks to Malva burning away most of the venom, the doctors were optimistic that they could reverse the damage. If it hadn't been for Malva, Trevor would be long dead.

"I thought our name was mighty clever," Wulfric said. "You know, the ice was my bit, and the slice is for that pet steak knife o' his. And the rhyming really brings it all together. That part was my idea," he boasted, in case anyone could not figure out the significance of their team name, which of course was already obvious to everyone present.

Korrina rolled her eyes, and Serena laughed. "I like it, too," she said. "But I like ours a lot, too."

"Tinkerbellator is way more creative than Ice 'n Slice," Korrina agreed.

"Hey, hey, let's not forget the score," Alain said. "Imelda, what's the

current point distribution?"

"That's seven for Tinkerbellator, ten for Ice 'n Slice, and fourteen for Dra-Grace," Imelda read.

"What? Bullshit," Korrina said. "When did you get fourteen points?"

"When Grace got the last five questions all on her own," Alain said.

"I'm surprised I know more about sports than any of you," Grace said. "Don't you all ever watch the races?"

Alain grinned, and his sharp incisor poked over his lip. Korrina rolled her eyes, but Serena suspected she wasn't really upset. Serena petted Sylveon, and he began to purr dreamily. All of this seemed a bit like a dream, really. She half expected to wake up and find herself chained to the stone wall, weary and weak and shaking with fear and cold, Laevus looming over her with needles and Trevor screaming in agony. Trevor wasn't screaming now, and Laevus was buried along with his lab and his atrocious experiments.

Wulfric's Delibird somehow made her way back to Snowbelle through the raging storm and got his letter to Mayor Remus, his brother, who deployed the Snow Rangers to rescue them all. They had arrived late, but without their help, Serena wasn't sure if they would have made it back to Snowbelle. Alain's Charizard and Calem's Aegislash were in intensive care at the Pokémon Center, along with most of the other Pokémon that had fought bravely alongside them to save Serena. Korrina had lost her Lucario, Serena learned, and Serena could not help but feel responsible. If she had lost Altaria or Sylveon or any of her other Pokémon, she did not know how she would ever get over it. They were her companions when she had no one else, always there and always strong even when she didn't know how to be.

But there were others now. Every one of these people had risked his or her life to find her, and Serena still could not quite believe it. Grace surprised her the most. Her pleb mother had never been a fighter and had never really understood or accepted Serena, even though she tried so hard to learn how. When Calem told Serena it was Grace to brought everyone here, who convinced Gurkinn and later Wulfric to help out however they could, Serena had never felt more loved. She was alive and safe because of Grace, and she had severely underestimated her mother. Never again.

Wulfric insisted they recover in Snowbelle until they were well enough to make the journey back to Lumiose City. Mayor Remus

would send Rangers after Malva, and Wulfric contacted Gym Leader Olympia of Anistar City to see if she might be able to track Malva's Delphox. If she was using Delphox to Teleport, Olympia could find her if she wanted to. So far, Olympia said there was no sign of Delphox Teleporting anywhere in Kalos, but that could mean anything or nothing. Serena was secretly glad they hadn't found Malva. She did not wish for her death, not after what she'd done to save Trevor's and her life when she didn't have to. Wherever Malva was, Serena hoped she would find a way to move on and live her life in peace.

Imelda drew another card. "Oh, another Famous Pokémon Trainers card," she said, flustered. "This late Pokémon Professor is credited with inventing the world's first Pokémon encyclopedia, nicknamed 'Pokédex'."

Serena perked up. "Hey, I think I know this one. That's Professor Samuel Oak, right?"

"Correct!" Imelda said.

"Hell yeah." Korrina gave Serena a high-five. "Now we're back in the game."

Serena smiled. Her face was starting to hurt from smiling so much. It felt so good, so easy. She could have stayed here with them all playing trivia forever so long as they were together. Sylveon meowed and got up to knead the woolen blanket keeping Serena warm, and she smoothed the coral pink ribbons of fur that hung from the feline's neck. Pink heartstrings danced around Sylveon and meshed with her own, identical. So beautiful.

If I wasn't a Magus, they never would have found me.

Alain beat Calem to the answer to Imelda's next question, and they got into an argument about trivia etiquette, which Wulfric was happy to explain in effusive detail. Serena watched them, their heartstrings a rainbow of light and color that connected them all.

She would never find the weird tree again. Xerneas, wherever it was, would probably never reveal itself to her again. But it had given her a gift more precious than any synesthetic sight or special blood.

Thank you, she thought as she watched the animated faces of all the people who had risked everything refusing to give up on her. *Wherever you are, thank you.*

"...and if you poach three questions, then you hafta do a naked run," Wulfric was saying.

"A naked run *where*?" Korrina said, her interest piqued.

"Oh, why, just down Main Street and back," Wulfric said. "Well, I say *naked*, but in truth you can keep your boots on. The sidewalks can be slick this time of year, and nobody wants a repeat o' the infamous slip and slide incident with the Beartic from last year."

Grace looked concerned. "Wait, what incident?"

"I'm *not* doing a naked run," Alain said, glaring at Korrina before she could say something to embarrass him.

"Yeah, no," Calem said.

"Why would a Beartic participate in a naked run?" Grace asked. No one seemed to share her legitimate concern, so she dropped the subject.

"That's strike two, Alain, so mind your tongue and you won't have to. But no one's above the Trivia Tuesday rules, no sir," Wulfric chided.

"Today's *Saturday*," Alain said. "This doesn't even count."

"Oh, great, then your points don't count and I guess you lose," Korrina said.

"All right, children, settle down," Grace said, although she was biting back a smile.

"Please don't say we're all winners," Calem said.

"No, of course not," Grace said. "Right now, only Alain and I are winners. You're lagging five points behind."

Calem gaped at Grace, and Wulfric laughed bawdily even as he clutched his bandaged belly that was still healing.

Over the following week, Trevor made a full recovery. He was walking with forearm crutches, but the doctors assured him that with time and physical therapy, he would be back to his old self soon enough. His parents and sister lived in Lumiose City, and when they were contacted about Trevor, they were overwhelmed with joy. Everyone had thought he was lost forever, gone without so much as a trace, and the local law enforcement had advised the family to start considering

the possibility that Trevor may never be found alive, if at all. Children disappeared all the time, especially pleb children with no way to defend themselves. It was a cruel fact of the world they lived in. But not this time.

Trevor asked Serena to teach him how to train Pokémon. The son of a bank teller and a school teacher, he had never had much exposure to Pokémon growing up. After everything he'd been through, he wanted to learn.

"I don't want what happened to us to happen to anybody else," he said as he entreated Serena. "I know I'm just a normal kid and there's nothing special about me, but I want to learn. You learned, right?"

"I did," Serena said. "And you *are* special, Trevor." She took his hands in hers and smiled. "You survived when it would've been easy to just give up. I don't think many other sixteen-year-old boys would have had half your courage. Maybe Tamers have some amazing powers; Alain can control Dragons and Korrina can fight with the strength of ten men, but that's not what makes us special. It's something more subtle, in here." She pressed a hand to his heart over his sweater. "I can see it, you know."

"See it?" he asked.

She smiled, and her eyes followed the flowing threads of light that pulsed with every beat of his heart and entwined with her own. "Your strength. It's dazzling."

Wulfric was sad to see the group go once everyone was well enough to make the journey. He shook Serena's hand in his, practically swallowing her in his meaty grip, and told her he expected to see her back in Snowbelle soon.

"Now, I mean it," he said. "Don't be a stranger. You've got a good head and a good heart. I like that about you young people. I can see why Grace and your friends worked so hard to help you."

Serena smiled. "I'll be back, I promise."

"And you too, Grace." He took her hand and kissed it politely. "I do hope to see you again very soon."

"Thank you for everything, Wulfric," Grace said. "I don't know how I'll ever repay you."

"You can do me the tremendous honor of attending the Spring Social. It's our annual figure skating grand prix, and I'd be much obliged to have your favor when I compete."

Grace blinked. "You'll be competing? I...didn't know you skated."

"Oh, sure, most everybody in Snowbelle figure skates. It's eco-friendly and it helps me keep my figure. Ho! There's a good little pun I just made. Where's Imelda? Imelda! Listen to this excellent pun I just thought of!" He waved to get Imelda's attention, and Imelda slipped on the icy Gym floor, she was so startled at hearing her boss bark at her out of nowhere. Her Sneasel screeched indignantly. "Well, anyway," Wulfric said, "it's during the spring equinox. I'll hold your ticket, all right?"

Serena laughed. "She'll be here, it's a date."

"Fantastic! Imelda, write this down, a ticket for Grace Gabena for the Spring Social. Where is that girl? Imelda!"

Grace was Tamato red, and Serena looped their arms together.

"Hey Mom, I think you have a not-so-secret admirer," she teased.

"You heard him, right? That he actually figure skates?" Grace said. "He must be more than twice my weight."

Serena laughed again. "I'm sure he's very graceful."

Wulfric made sure everyone was supplied for their trips home. Korrina was on her way back to Shalour City to resume her official Gym Leader duties, and everyone expected Alain to return with her, but he insisted on visiting Lumiose City first. He had unfinished business that he had been running from for too long.

Calem's parents were waiting at Sycamore's lab along with Sycamore himself, and his mother broke down crying when she saw him. Both of his parents had been out of town on business when Malva showed up and kidnapped Serena, and neither had seen their son since then. Sycamore embraced Serena and twirled her around, laughing and over the moon to see her again safe and sound, but he nearly dropped her when he saw Mega Altaria looming over them and burst into tears.

"Sweet Swadloon, I've never seen anything so magnificent," he gushed as tears streamed freely down his face.

Calem was appalled. "Professor, *why* are you crying?!"

"For science!" he wept. Sycamore ran his hands through Mega Altaria's downy feathers, shaking. "He's too beautiful, and I have so many papers to write. Oh! My critics will be *dazzled*!"

Grace had to lead him inside like a dazed child before he completely lost his sanity.

But the reunions were sweet, and Serena had never been so happy to sleep in her bed in the room she'd occupied since she first started coming to Sycamore's lab as a child. Laevus's Darumaka was also happy to sleep on the bed, much to Sylveon's chagrin, but nothing could deter the ebullient Zen Charm Pokémon.

"I'm sorry, Maru," Serena whispered to him in the dark. "I know you loved Laevus, and Malva, too. But I promise I'll take care of you."

Darumaka's orange heartstrings rolled with him over the duvet, and Sylveon puffed up to nearly twice his size when Darumaka rolled over his tail. Serena bit back a laugh and pulled them both close, one on each side, and they fell asleep together.

The next morning when she awoke, she let Rhydon out on the rooftop terrace along with Grace's Rhyhorn, while Altaria flew south in search of food. Rhydon yawned and wanted nothing more than to lie down and sunbathe, and Serena spent the morning polishing his horn to soothe him. Sylveon hopped up on Rhydon's back and curled up for a nap of his own, and being here like this made Serena feel like it had all been a dream.

But when she headed to the cafeteria for a late breakfast and found Alain there in an apron smudged with chocolate and carrying out a tray of lumpy but delicious smelling brownies, Serena knew it was no dream; it was better.

"So it turns out I'm a little rusty at the baking thing," Alain said as they gorged on the brownies.

"I love them," Serena said, all smiles. She could not remember the last time she'd tasted something sweet. The days in Laevus's lab seemed like weeks in retrospect, bleak and cold and dreary. "And I love you for remembering."

"About that," Alain said. "I think I owe you an explanation."

"You don't owe me anything, Alain. You're here now, that's what counts."

"I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for Calem," he insisted gently. "I promised him I would tell you everything, that I'd stop running. I'm done breaking my promises."

So, he told her everything. From his employment with Team Flare, to the secret expedition to Hoenn to retrieve the monolith for Lysandre, to Mairin and his defection, and finally Korrina.

"She saved me," Alain said. "I didn't deserve it, but she did it anyway. She and Gurkinn both. I can't take back the years and everything I did." He placed his hand on Serena's. "But I want you to know, I'm sorry I left the way I did. I'm sorry I never came back until now. You trusted me, and you deserved so much better than the way I treated you."

Serena's eyes were hot with unshed tears, and she blinked to dispel them. "I didn't want to admit it, but a part of me thought I'd never see you again."

"I promise, I'll never make you feel that way again."

She smiled and pulled him close for a hug. As a girl, alone and afraid and ignorant of what she was and what had happened to her, Alain had been the one who made her feel safe and special. She felt it again now as he held her and his red wings, invisible to all but her eyes, closed around her like strong arms.

"God, you've gotten big," he said playfully when they separated. He ruffled her hair like he used to, and she laughed.

"I guess I did grow up," Serena said.

"Nah, you'll always be my little sister," he said, and then he flashed her that grin that had made her feel all warm and fuzzy when she was a child. "Right?"

"Yeah, always."

"Good, because I could use your help with something," Alain began. "Er, more like, I guess... I'd feel a lot more confident if you came with me to talk to her."

"Her?"

"That little girl I told you about, Mairin. I really hurt her when I left Team Flare. She, uh... Well, I guess she reminded me of you..."

Serena smiled softly. "Of course I'll go with you. I can't wait to meet her."

Meeting Mairin required a trip to Lysandre Labs, the official headquarters for Team Flare. Sycamore and Grace accompanied them on their trip, and Serena had the chance of a lifetime to look in the eyes the man who had employed Laevus and Malva, a man called Lysandre. He received them in his spacious penthouse office, where a male Pyroar was snoozing by the crackling hearth. It was dreary and cold outside, but Pyroar's natural heat warmed the room.

"Well, this is certainly a surprise," Lysandre said when he came face to face with Alain. "I have to say, Alain, I never expected to see you again after our last parting."

"I've been surprising a lot of people these days," Alain said evenly. "Myself included. I'm here to see Mairin. Where are you keeping her?"

Lysandre smiled congenially, but Serena and Klefki, who hung back together, watched him warily.

You see it, too, don't you?

Pale pink highlights accented the faint white heartstrings that marked all skuffs. The pink wisps were so pale they were nearly invisible. But no skuff Serena had ever seen had pink heartstrings. Pink was the color of the Magi who were all dead and gone except for her. It didn't make sense. There were no Magi skuffs, just as there were no Medium or Reaper skuffs. The three original Tamers had to be made by others of their kind, that was what Sycamore had told her years ago when he explained that she, too, had been made by Xerneas, the Original Fairy. Lysandre was no Magus, that much was plain to see. So why...

Why does he feel so familiar?

"I'm not keeping her anywhere; she's free to come and go as she pleases. Children must be given their freedoms," Lysandre said. "I would be very happy to show you to her, but I doubt she'll want to see you."

"I'll let her tell me that herself," Alain said.

Lysandre let his piercing blue eyes roam over Alain, then Sycamore

and Grace, and finally Serena. He watched her. "And you are?"

"My daughter," Grace said, positioning herself between Serena and Lysandre.

Lysandre barely reacted to that as he continued to watch Serena and Klefki tinkling softly by her head. "...Serena, yes? If I recall, the last time I spoke with Augustine and Ms. Gabena, they were searching for you. I'm glad to see you've returned safely."

"Thank you," Serena said.

He nodded politely.

He doesn't see me, she realized. *He doesn't see my heartstrings.*

"Speaking of which," Sycamore said. "As it turns out, Malva was behind Serena's kidnapping, as I suspected. She was working with her brother, Laevus, who I've learned was also an employee of yours. Quite the gifted scientist, in fact."

"Yes, I'm aware of all this, and I've been in close contact with Gym Leader Clemont. His people are currently searching for Malva. She returned here and fled the city soon after, as I'm told. Team Flare and I are fully cooperating with the Gym to apprehend Malva and Laevus, wherever they may be."

I don't understand, Serena thought as she watched Lysandre carefully. *His heartstrings... They're not reacting. I can't tell if he's lying or not.*

It was the strangest sensation. People's heartstrings usually reacted violently if they lied or felt their emotions passionately, but Lysandre's merely swirled around him in slow and lazy curls.

Is he... Could he be doing it on purpose?

Serena did not realize she'd been staring until he caught her doing it, and she looked away, startled.

"I'm sure you are," Sycamore said, totally unconvinced. "Just as I'm sure Gym Leader Clemont will eventually get to the bottom of what happened. He always does."

Lysandre and Sycamore looked at each other in silent challenge, neither backing down. Alain cleared his throat.

"Lysandre. Take me to see Mairin. *Now*."

Lysandre's gaze slithered to Alain, and there was the faintest spike in his heartstrings, like an electric shock. "...Of course. Right this way."

They went, but when Grace noticed Serena hanging back, she stopped. "Serena, honey? What's the matter?"

Serena shook her head. "I'm...not sure."

Grace looked at her and said very softly, "Whatever it is, we'll discuss it back at the lab."

Yes, Serena thought. This place was not safe, not so long as Lysandre was here.

Lysandre led them to one of the lower floors, which looked like a private infirmary for Pokémon and people alike. He stopped at one of the rooms and opened the door for Alain.

"I have things to do," Lysandre said. "I'm sure you remember how busy I am. I'll send my assistant to show you out." To Alain he said, "It was good to see you, Alain. I trust your Charizard is in good health."

Alain did not even give him the satisfaction of an answer.

Sycamore smiled. "Goodbye, Lysandre," he said.

Lysandre's frigid gaze intensified as he walked away, dignified, and Serena watched him go. Klefki watched him, too, curious.

"I know," Serena whispered. "I see it, too."

But there was no time to worry about Lysandre right now. Mairin, a young girl around thirteen years old, was in the infirmary room hunched over a glass case where a small Chespin appeared to be sleeping. Monitors measuring his vitals beeped and blinked against the wall, and an IV fed him intravenously while he slept. As soon as Lysandre had opened the door and admitted their party, however, Mairin was on the defensive.

"Mairin," Alain said, approaching.

Mairin, a short girl, round and cute with little braids in her hair and a fierceness in her matching brown eyes, was pale with shock at the sight of him. "A-Alain!" She recovered quickly, however, and positioned herself between Chespin and Alain before he could close the distance, her little arms spread like she was afraid Alain would try

to hurt him. "Don't come any closer!"

"Mairin," Alain said again, gently. "I know you're probably still mad at me, but I came to apologize. Please, just let me—"

"I said, go away!" she snapped when he tried to reach for her. "I don't wanna see you."

"I know you don't," Alain said. "And I'll go if that's what you want. But not before I explain. I owe you that."

"No," Mairin said, her eyes glistening with tears. "No, I don't wanna talk to you."

"Mairin, please—"

"I hate you," she hissed. Her tears were falling freely now, fat and hot on her cheeks. "I *hate* you."

Alain said nothing as he looked at her. Eventually, he nodded, and Serena watched as the magnificent red wings that she'd always found so beautiful and strong fell, broken around his shoulders as sadness overcame him. "I know you do."

"Mairin," Sycamore said, trying to defuse the situation. "Why don't we go for a walk? Are you hungry? Grace was telling me that she would love to take you to lunch. How does that sound?"

Grace did her best to smile. "Yes, that's right. And Mairin, I'd like you to meet my daughter, Serena. Do you remember that I was looking for her the last time I saw you?"

Mairin pressed herself against the recovery case. "No, I don't wanna go. I wanna stay with Chespie."

Grace kneeled down and looked up at Mairin. "That's very brave of you. I'm sure Chespie feels really lucky to have you. You've never given up on him, right?"

Mairin looked suspicious as she watched Grace. "I'll never give up on him. He'll get better, Lysandre promised he would." She glared at Alain. "He keeps his promises."

Mairin was a pleb girl, her heartstrings the same faint glistens of light that orbited most people in the world. Serena could see it all, even the pulsing bloody threads that rose like smoke over Mairin's head.

Wait, what?

Serena pushed past Alain, Klefki close behind, and approached the glass recovery case where Mairin's Chespin slept. Mairin saw her advancing and grew anxious.

"Hey, don't come closer," she said, wary and afraid and bitterly sad.

Klefki jingled at Mairin, startling her, and Grace laid a hand on Mairin's shoulder.

"It's all right, Mairin," she said.

Mairin was growing increasingly concerned, however.

"Serena," Sycamore said, a quiet warning.

Serena stared at Chespin, unsure what she was seeing. "That's not right," she said more to herself than to the others.

"What's not right?" Mairin said.

"This Chespin, he's not himself." Serena touched the glass, and the whorl of color recoiled from her touch.

Mairin saw nothing of what Serena saw. "What's that s'posed to mean? Hey, what're you doing? You can't touch that!"

Serena was too absorbed in her own thoughts to stop. She found the release on the case and pushed it. The glass barrier opened, and Chespin was exposed. Serena covered her mouth and nose. "Oh..."

Klefki jingled angrily, as though the smell of Chespin offended him.

"Serena, what is it?" Sycamore asked, curious instead of concerned as he rose. "Do you see something?"

"Yes, but I don't know..." Serena reached for Chespin all of a sudden.

"No, leave him alone," Mairin said.

Grace took her small hands. "Mairin, it's all right. Serena can see things you and I can't."

"I don't care what she sees, if she hurts Chespie, then I'll hurt *her*."

The strange bloody heartstrings grew out of Chespin like thick flames,

boiling and popping. They stung when she got too close to them, but buried deep within was a glowing green light, Chespin's natural heartstrings. They were faint, as though they were suffocating.

What is this?

"Serena," Sycamore said. "Tell me what you see."

"I'm not sure. It's like... It's like Chespie's drowning. Wait..." Serena hissed as she tried to touch the sinister shadowy heartstrings, and their bloody tendrils stung her fingers like needles. "Klefki, help me."

Klefki's jeweled heart pulsed as he hovered over Serena, his keys heavy and tinkling, and his silvery and pink heartstrings swirled around the blight, helping them part for Serena to reach inside. Her hands stung, and her own heartstrings began to thrum and spark, as though short-circuiting. Serena bit her tongue and tasted blood.

"Klefki, more," she commanded.

"More what? What's she doing?" Mairin said.

Serena touched Chespin's true green heartstrings and sank her fingers into them, grasping the blighted tendrils at the roots where they connected. Klefki obeyed her command, and his jeweled heart released a burst of energy that manifested in visible light. The Crafty Shield came into view for just a second or two, and Serena closed her hands around it as she scooped the blight up like a bundle of bloody worms. They squirmed in her fingers, trapped in Klefki's Crafty Shield, and she heard Sycamore gasp as they became momentarily visible within Klefki's attack.

Serena gritted her teeth to the pain, like fire in her fingers, and squeezed with all her strength and Klefki's. The Crafty Shield shrank under her palms, and she crushed the blighted worms under the pressure until they snuffed out and dissipated to nothing but shadows. Alain was right behind her when she stumbled back, her hands shaking and raw where the skin had cracked and bled.

"Professor, she needs a nurse," Alain said.

Sycamore was still in shock at the flash of the blight he'd seen along with everyone else in the moment Serena pulled it out of Chespin. "I... Right, yes, I'll be right back." He dashed out the door.

"Serena," Grace said, horrified. "Your hands!"

"I'm okay," Serena said, more interested in Chespin, whose green heartstrings were slowly but steadily growing, like a fire fed oxygen. Klefki hovered over him, swaying like a snake charmer as he rode the reaching heartstrings. "Chespie's okay, too."

"Chespie?" Mairin said, completely forgetting her earlier anger at Serena as she reached for her Pokémon. "Chespie!"

Chespin twitched and slowly woke up with a squeak, weak and tinny but alive. Klefki jingled happily.

"Chespie? Are you really awake? I'm not dreaming again?"

Chespin chittered and pawed at Mairin's hand weakly, and Mairin burst into tears of joy as she kissed his little forehead and scratched his tummy.

"Chespie, you're okay!"

Sycamore returned with an infirmary orderly, who helped Serena get cleaned up and bandaged. Her hands stung badly, but the bleeding wasn't too bad, and soon they were bandaged. The orderly offered Serena an intravenous Potion to help with the abrasions, but she refused. She'd had enough of needles for one lifetime. Mairin was beside herself with smiles and laughter as she talked to Chespin and petted him, promising that he'd be out of here soon.

"Serena," Sycamore said softly. "I'd like to talk to you back at the lab."

Serena nodded. "Yeah, no problem." But first, she had something else she wanted to do. "Mairin?"

Mairin, fresh tears of happiness in her eyes, wiped them on her sleeve and beamed up at Serena. "You saved Chespie! I'm so, so sorry I got mad at you before. I just, I was so scared for Chespie, and I...I—"

Serena smiled. "It's all right, I understand. I was like you once, and my Swablu was in bad shape. It was up to me to be brave for him, just like you were brave for Chespie. You were just concerned about him, right?"

Mairin seemed to latch onto that and composed herself a little. "Yeah, that's right."

Grace put a hand on Serena's shoulder and squeezed, a silent encouragement.

"Oh," Mairin said. "I'm real sorry about your hands, Serena. Do they hurt?"

"I'll be all right, don't worry. I'm just glad I could help. You know, Alain was the one who asked me to come and meet you today."

Mairin blinked warily. "He did?" She eyed Alain behind Serena.

"That's right. He knew we'd be fast friends. Want to know why?"

Mairin's eyes were wide and curious in the way only a child can manage. "Why?"

"Because he loves us both very much. You know, like a big brother." Serena ruffled Mairin's bangs with her bandaged fingers. "And that kind of makes us sisters, don't you think?"

Mairin blushed and looked at her feet. "I guess..."

"And sisters look out for each other," Serena continued. "Like I helped you with Chespie."

"Thank you!" Mairin said quickly, embarrassed that she'd forgotten to say thank you. "What you did... I mean, I dunno what it was, but you save Chespie. Thank you so much."

"Don't thank me," Serena said. "Thank Alain. I wouldn't be here if he hadn't saved me from some people who were keeping me far away."

"...He did?"

"Oh yeah, he and Mega Charizard. You know Mega Charizard, right?"

Mairin smiled a little. "Yeah, I know him. He's black and blue and this tall." She reached up with her hand as high as she could. "Even taller than that! Alain 'n me used to Fly around on his back, it was the best."

Serena laughed. "I bet it was. You know, I bet if you asked, Alain and Mega Charizard would Fly with you again anywhere you wanted to go. How does that sound?"

Mairin was silent for a moment. "Did... Did Alain really bring you here to save Chespie?"

"Why don't you ask him yourself?" Serena stepped aside so that she was no longer in between Mairin and Alain.

Mairin took a deep breath as she braced herself to talk to Alain directly. He looked at her, but he dared not approach.

"Well?" Mairin asked.

"I was part of the group who saved Serena," Alain said. "But before that, I had to be saved, first."

"Why? Were you in trouble?" Mairin's concern betrayed her resentment, just a little.

"I was," Alain said. "I made a big mistake. I left someone behind who I care about a lot because I was selfish, and she and her Pokémon got hurt because of it."

Mairin made a face. She knew he was talking about her.

"I wasn't strong enough to fix it back then, but I met someone who helped me get stronger," Alain went on. "It's because of her that I was able to help Serena. And now, if you'll let me, I'd like to help you, too."

"How?" Mairin demanded. "Chespie's okay because of Serena. You can't just pretend like it never happened. I was here; I saw it. You *left*."

Her words hurt Alain more than he let on, and he sank to one knee. "You're right. I left you and Chespie because I was weak. I was weak and selfish and afraid. I did this, you were right. I'm glad Chespie's okay now, but I also know that it doesn't change what I did. All I can say is how sorry I am, Mairin. I don't deserve your forgiveness, but you deserve my apology. So...you can hate me. I would hate me, too. That's okay. I'm strong enough to live with that now. It won't ever change how I feel about you. I just wanted you to know that."

Mairin said nothing, and Alain got up. Sycamore nodded to him, and together they began to leave. Serena and Grace exchanged a look, unsure what to do, but Mairin went after Alain before he could leave and threw her arms around his waist.

"Wait! Alain, wait, don't leave again," she pleaded with him, her big brown eyes wet with tears. "I'm sorry I said that. I don't hate you, I don't! Chespie's okay and it wasn't your fault that he went to sleep for so long, so please! Don't leave again..."

Alain kneeled down and held her by the shoulders. "I won't leave you again, Mairin, I promise. I'm so sorry."

She laughed through her sobbing and hugged him tight about the neck, and he held her close. Klefki and Chespin looked on, unsure what all the hollering and hugging was about but wanting to be a part of the attention. Klefki jingled about Serena, hoping she might give him a hug.

"Mom?" Serena asked when she saw Grace dabbing tears from her eyes. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Just remembering." She smiled at Serena.

Serena had the sudden urge to take her mother's hand, and so she did. Grace kissed the bandages wrapped around her hand and looped an arm around Serena's shoulders. Serena leaned into Grace's side and smiled to herself. They had all fought and suffered to get here, but it was worth it, so worth it.

Alain set off for Shalour City with Mairin and Chespin not long after. Without a home of her own, Mairin had no one in the world but him, and he was happy to look after her. This time, he wouldn't leave the people he cared about behind when they needed him most. Serena was sad to see them go, but it wasn't goodbye, not truly. She would see Alain again soon, she was sure of it. He wasn't running anymore.

Sycamore was curious about what had been the matter with Chespin, and he all but accosted Serena for answers when they returned to the safety of his lab just outside the city and took tea on the terrace where Rhydon and Altaria were currently relaxing by the pond. She explained the odd wormy heartstrings she'd seen, thicker than anything she'd ever seen before, and described how they seemed to suffocate Chespin.

"And these weren't Chespie's heartstrings?" Sycamore asked.

"Definitely not. Chespie's are bright green, like most Grass-type Pokémon's. These were dark red, like Dragonsblood almost, and kind of smoky. It was like..."

"Yes?"

"Like...they were feeding on Chespie's heartstrings or something."

Sycamore thought about that. "Like a parasite? Can heartstrings do that?"

Serena was about to say no, but she hesitated.

"Serena?" Sycamore asked. "What are you thinking?"

"The Mega Stones," she said. "Laevus implanted them in his body."

"Yes, I heard the whole story from you and the others when you got back here."

"Well, with Laevus, it was like the Mega Stones had their own heartstrings, all different colors. And when he implanted them and fed them my blood, they seemed to, I don't know... It was like they were poisoning him."

"Poisoning," Sycamore said. "Or perhaps consuming him?"

Serena nodded. "Maybe. But that was a completely different situation. And it didn't look quite like what was happening to Chespie."

Sycamore sighed. "I'm afraid without knowing what exactly caused Chespie to fall into a coma, the answer may elude us. I don't suppose Lysandre will be so gracious as to give me unfettered access to his lab to get the answers myself, either."

Serena frowned. "Professor, that reminds me. There was something else. It's about Lysandre. You said he was a skuff."

"Yes, that's right."

"What kind of skuff is he?"

"Oh, well that's... You know, I'm actually not sure. I've never asked, and he's never volunteered that information. Not that he would. We're not, ah, on the best of terms, as you saw." Sycamore smiled sheepishly.

"But you're sure he's a skuff?" Serena pressed.

Sycamore looked at her. "Now that you're asking, maybe I'm not so sure. I was under the impression that your synesthesia could detect a skuff's heartstrings and discern his identity."

"I can, and I'm pretty sure he's a skuff, but..."

"But?"

Serena looked around, but there was no one on the terrace but them.

Altaria lifted his head and peered at Serena and cooed, fluffing his ample snowy plumage.

"Professor," she started. "You told me skuffs can't be made, only born just like most Tamers. Except that Mediums, Reapers, and Magi are all made."

"That's right," Sycamore said, leaning over his knees as his curiosity was piqued.

"Well, what if I said I thought Lysandre was a Magus skuff?"

"You think Lysandre has Magus blood? You saw that in his heartstrings?"

"I saw what should've been a skuff, but his color... It was like mine. How can that be?"

Sycamore laced his fingers together and thought about that. "But that's just so unlikely... No, but he did say... What're the odds?"

He was mumbling to himself, and Serena waited for him to finish, knowing from experience that interrupting him would not speed up the process. Finally, he turned to her once more.

"Serena, do you know about Liminals?" he said suddenly.

"What?"

"Liminality, you know, occupying two sides of a threshold. Here, observe." He got up and spread his feet so that he was standing with one foot on each side of a crack in the tile. "Now I'm in two places at once. Or, I exist in two parallel universes, here and there. Do you understand the concept?"

"I think so?"

Sycamore smiled. "Fabulous! Now, you're right about skuffs; they can only be born. Which means they're the product of genetics. Ergo, there are no Medium, Magus, or Reaper skuffs because those Tamers, like yourself, were all once *genetically* plebs before they were turned. But! Imagine this. You grow up and have a daughter of your own. She would not be a Magus because, as you know, Magi are made, so you can't pass down your Tamer abilities through genetics. Now, let's say you were to marry a Tamer, perhaps Calem. He's a Steel Adamantine."

"Um..."

"Normally, the mother's Tamer abilities trump the father's. But since you're a Magus, the rule doesn't apply, so any child you have with Calem would be an Adamantine, or perhaps an Adamantine skuff. Your Magus blood ends with you."

Serena decided not to argue with his example. There was no stopping him when he was on a roll.

"*But*! Let's suppose you were to marry a pleb man. What happens then? Well, your children would not be Magi because of the rule, as you know. But neither would they be skuffs. They *might*, however, be Liminals."

Serena's blank stare communicated plainly that she still did not know what a Liminal was. Sycamore was undeterred and pointed at his feet.

"This is you." He indicated his left foot. "And this is your hypothetical pleb husband and father of your children." He pointed to his right foot. "And *this*," he said, tracing the crack in the tile, "is the liminal rift in the universe. Neither left nor right, but in between. Not Tamer, not skuff, not pleb, but—"

"—a Liminal," Serena said.

"Yes! Yes, that's exactly right!" Sycamore's prayer beads rattled on his wrists as he began to pace. "Now, let me be clear. There are very few Mediums in the world and only one Magus." He bowed slightly to her. "There are more Reapers, true, but many of them fall victim to other Reapers hoping to cannibalize them to extend their own lives—"

Serena paled. "Wait, what?"

"—so you can understand that they're also quite scarce, all things considered. With such a small test pool, you see how research in this area is nearly nonexistent. *BUT*!"

Rhydon woke up all of a sudden and growled at Sycamore.

"But?" Serena said.

"One person has undertaken some fascinating research into the existence of Liminals in the past several years. Professor Kukui, a colleague of mine in Alola, has studied Tamers and their abilities, and he claims he encountered a Medium Liminal descended from a long

line of ancient Alolan kings, some of whom were actual Mediums. Of course, Liminals may not know they're Liminals because there's really not much outward indication, at least that we know of, which is because not many Liminals have been confirmed and we have limited information..."

He was babbling nonsensically again. Serena decided to intervene this time. "Professor, are you trying to say that Lysandre might be one of these Liminals?"

"Yes, precisely!" Sycamore said. "That's exactly what I mean. We have no way of telling with our current level of technology, but *you*! You, Serena, you're like a walking metal detector for Tamers and skuffs, and now even Liminals! You can see their heartstrings. That's something even Mediums can't do. It's amazing!"

"But how can Lysandre be a Magus Liminal? I thought the Magi died out centuries ago?"

"They did. But Professor Kukui believes that Liminals can pass along their status over generations. So in theory, if any of Lysandre's ancestors were Magi, then it explains why he could be a Liminal. Actually, Lysandre's ancestors were the House of Fleur-de-Lis."

"You mean the old kings of Kalos? But I thought the last king reigned 3,000 years ago in the Great Kalosian Wars. Nobody knows what happened to him, not even how or when he died."

Sycamore smiled. "Yes, but he had a family whose genealogy was quite diligently chronicled by Professor Carolina, a great historian from Celestic Town. She came here years ago to interview Lysandre for the genealogical study. Now, of course this isn't detailed in the genealogy, but from what little evidence remains to us today about the Great Kalosian War and the history of Tamers, I suspect that that king may have been one of the first Magi, created by Xerneas just like you were."

Serena's head swam. "So...Lysandre's descended from this king, this first Magus, and that's why he's a Liminal?"

Sycamore shrugged. "You tell me. You're the one who saw his heartstrings."

That must be it, Serena thought. *I know what I saw.*

"Klefki saw it, too," she said. "He has to be a Liminal."

"Well, that really puts me in a difficult position. I can't very well tell him without also telling him about how I know." Sycamore shook his head forlornly. "Ah, how cruel this world is to give me a Magus Liminal right here to observe and study, but to also make him the leader of a dubious international conglomerate possibly engaged in rampant illegal activity. I must be cursed!"

Serena got up. "You're not cursed, Professor. And you've still got me. I might not be a Liminal, but I'm a real Magus and I've got a Mega Altaria you're welcome to study as much as you like."

Sycamore completely forgot about Lysandre for a moment as he nearly wept at the thought of Mega Altaria. "Sweet Serena, you spoil me. But on a more serious note, if this is all true about Lysandre and about Chespie, then I think we need to be *very* careful with Team Flare. Gym Leader Clemont won't budge without any hard evidence, which we don't have." He put up his hand when Serena started to protest. "And no, I'm sorry, but I won't reveal your true identity to anyone, not even the Gym Leader. I won't risk another incident like what happened with Malva and Laevus, and neither should you. There are a lot of people who would be very upset if anything ever happened to you again."

Serena bit her lip. "I know. But I want to help. There has to be something I can do."

Sycamore smiled. "There is. You can go home and enjoy the time you have with the people you love. They worked very hard to see you safely home, and the world will still be here tomorrow in need of saving."

"Well, what're you going to do?"

"For now? Nothing. But I'll keep an eye on Lysandre and his Team Flare. Sooner or later, I imagine he won't be content to let things lie, especially not after the fiasco in the White Mountains with Malva and Laevus. The battle may be over, but wars are not won in a day. We all have to do our parts to be ready. Just not today."

So Serena returned to Vaniville Town with Grace, who actually seemed to enjoy riding on Mega Altaria all the way there. So much had changed about Grace in their time apart. Or maybe Grace had always been this way, this complex, emotional, passionate, incredibly courageous woman who could be a hero for her daughter when she needed it most. Maybe nothing had changed, and Serena was simply

seeing it true for the first time. Their house was the same as it had been with its red door, picket fence, and the garden around the back. But when Serena went inside after all this time away, when she saw the pictures on the walls, when she smelled the citrus cleaner and grass, when she heard Fletchling tweeting happily as he flew around the living room, everything changed. She dropped her backpack, ran her hands over the kitchen counter, the sofa, the window panes overlooking the garden, and she could not help the tears that filled her eyes.

For the first time since she ran away all those years ago and lost more than her life in the forest, she felt like she had finally come home.

Grace was also smiling through her tears as she watched Serena take it all in, and Serena went to her. They embraced and stood there for a little while, simply holding onto each other in silence. Words were not necessary, and Serena let herself feel this moment as she never had before.

"Welcome home, Serena," Grace whispered.

"I missed you, Mom," Serena said.

They fell back into a semblance of their old routine: morning grocery shopping, gardening, walks around town and in the woods, cooking in the evening, a little bit of television. But they did them together. Serena wanted to learn how to make her grandmother's chiffon pie, a secret family recipe, and it took a few tries to get the hang of it, but Grace was patient and they had plenty of pie to share as Grace talked about the first time she'd tried to make the pie, which was a complete disaster. Grace would join Serena in the garden, it needed weeding, and she'd always wanted to grow roses. Serena didn't know much about roses, so they learned together.

It wasn't perfect, but few relationships ever are. The lingering looks, the questions that no one voiced aloud, the hesitation before engaging in conversation—they were not gone, but they were no longer tacitly accepted. And trying became easier, so easy that neither of them really thought about it anymore and simply lived.

"There's something I want to show you," Serena said one morning as she led Grace into the garden.

"Oh no, did Mrs. Petunia's Deerling get into the yard again? I told her to keep an eye on him," Grace said.

Serena smiled. "No, nothing like that. You'll like this. Come and see."

They went into the garden and kneeled down by the rose bush they'd planted. Blue winter roses were in full bloom this time of year, and a delicate film of ice coated their sapphire petals. But it was not the beautiful flowers Serena had in mind.

"Look there, see?" She indicated the roses. "It's okay, don't be shy."

"Shy?" Grace said.

"Oh, not you, them."

The way Grace's face morphed from passing curiosity to pure wonderment was magical. Tiny Flabébé nested in the rose bush, huddling among the fleshy petals for warmth and sustenance. But it was a slightly larger version of the delicate Fairies that concerned Serena, for she was poking her head out of the leaves above and peering down at Grace.

"Fairies?" Grace said. "But they're so small."

"They're babies. Flabébé," Serena explained. "They evolve into Floette after a full cycle of seasons, and then they leave on the wind."

"They've been here all this time?"

Serena nodded.

"They're...kind of cute." Grace smiled as a Flabébé poked her little head out of the petals and blinked up at her. "Hello..."

Floette above clutched her winter rose like a lady clutching a parasol and bravely floated down, her curiosity piqued. She landed on Grace's head as delicately as a snowflake, and Grace didn't notice. Serena tried not to laugh.

"What is it?" Grace said.

"Um, don't freak out, okay?"

Grace gave her a pointed look. "When do I ever 'freak out'?"

"Well..."

Grace stood up to her full height, but she jostled Floette, and the little Fairy floated off her head and had to grasp at the rose bush leaves to

keep from falling. Grace gasped and shook her fingers through her hair. Serena burst out laughing.

"What the—!" Grace said.

"No, Mom, it's okay! That's Floette. She was just curious about you," Serena said. "See? Come on, Floette."

Floette was about as tall as Serena's forearm was long, and she peeked at Grace from the safety of the rose bush.

"Hey, I think she likes you," Serena said. "Go on, say hi!"

Grace swallowed hard and composed herself. She'd faced things a lot bigger and scarier than this dainty little flower Fairy, and she was not about to chicken out now. She held out her hand, and Floette leaned over her fingers. Her blue rose shook as she moved and shed Fairy dust.

"It's cold," Grace said.

"Well, it's winter and she's been outside."

"Are they cold out here? I mean, should we bring them inside or something?"

Serena gave her a funny look. "You want to bring the rose bush and all the Flabébé inside?"

"Well, maybe just this one."

"Floette."

"Right, Floette. Oh!"

Floette hopped onto Grace's hand and hovered over her palm. She twirled her flower like she was dancing to her own music.

"Uh-oh," Serena said.

"What, uh-oh?" Grace said, worried.

"If she likes you, she'll take you away into the forest to be a hermit for the rest of your life."

"That's..."

Serena burst out laughing. "I'm kidding! She's a Fairy, not some creepy Ghost!"

"That wasn't funny."

Serena bit her lip to hide her grin. "Well, I'm cold. I'm going back inside with Sylveon where it's nice and warm."

"All right."

Grace lingered outside a moment longer as Floette traveled up her arm and danced on her shoulder. She smiled a little and talked to Floette, wondering if she was cold, what did she eat, and why had Grace never noticed the horde of tiny Fairies living in the garden? Serena watched from the living room, where Sylveon was meowing like a spoiled kitten wanting a belly rub. She obliged him.

"I wonder if I should tell her that Floette's just adopted her?" Serena wondered aloud.

Sylveon purred.

"I guess she'll figure it out."

Floette stayed, and she came inside, too. She followed Grace around everywhere and never backed down to the loud and proud Fletchling, who now found himself having to share his mistress with someone other than Rhyhorn. Sylveon tried to eat Floette at one point, however, and Fletchling was so mad that he chased Sylveon around the house like a Dragon on a rampage. That was when Grace decided she would properly catch Floette and learn how to train her. There was no way she would ever be helpless if another Malva showed up one day looking for a fight. Who better to help her learn than a bona fide Magus who also happened to be her daughter?

Calem visited not long after Serena and Grace returned to Vaniville Town. He'd spent some time at home with his parents, who were equal parts horrified and proud concerning everything Calem had done and what had been done to him in his quest to find Serena. Serena was ecstatic to see him and to finally spend some time together, just the two of them. Grace was also very happy to have Calem staying with them, and Serena discovered that so much had changed in her time away.

"So, you and my mom are besties now, huh?" she teased him as they walked along a trail at the edge of the woods.

"I've been told I'm popular with older women," Calem said.

Serena laughed and shoved him playfully. Aegislash, who was back to her old self with a mended shield, opened her single jeweled eye and looked around from her perch strapped to Calem's back, and Klefki did his usual jingle as he floated along in between Calem and Serena.

"Hey, thanks for looking out for her," Serena said once she'd collected herself. "She told me all about it, how you fought Malva and then at the base in the White Mountains. She said you were amazing."

Calem averted his gaze. "I guess."

His silver heartstrings were coiled tight, guarded, nervous.

"Hey," Serena said, stopping. "Calem."

He stopped. "Yeah?"

"It's me," she said. "I'm still me. And you're still you. I know a lot happened, but it hasn't changed how I feel about you. You know that, right?"

She touched his sleeve and ran her fingers lightly down it, tracing the deep scars Malva had left on him. Grace had told her about that, too, and about how he'd learned to fight through the disability all to save her, anyway.

"I..." Calem said, searching for the words.

"Is everything okay?" she asked, now a little concerned. She'd never seen him so anxious. "You can talk to me, you know."

He looked at her, debating. "I don't know, Serena."

"Well, now you have to tell me, or I'll suffer in suspense. Is something wrong?"

Klefki tinkled in between them, swaying lightly, content just to be here with the two of them after so long. Calem looked like he was gearing up for something.

"I don't want to lose you," he said.

"Hey." She took his hands and smiled. "You're my best friend; you'll never lose me. In fact, good luck trying to get rid of me."

He didn't return her smile, and she began to grow a little nervous.

"Calem?"

"Okay," he said, his voice dry. "If you really want to know."

"I do. Please."

"I... I mean, I'm... What I mean is, we've known each other for a long time..." he stammered.

"Yeah?"

"What I'm trying to say is..."

When he didn't elaborate, Serena said, "Calem, just tell me."

"I... I love you," he said.

"Yeah, I love you, too," Serena said.

He took a steadying breath. "No, that's... I mean, I'm *in love* with you. Like, for years. I didn't want to say anything because I didn't think you felt the same way, and I didn't want to pressure you or something. But then all this happened, and I thought I'd lost you forever, and then Alain was back and I know you guys're close, and it was just all fucked up. *I* fucked up, I should've stopped Malva, and I never told you how I felt, and god, I was actually jealous of that guy for no reason..."

Serena let him ramble himself into a pregnant silence.

"You're not saying anything," he said, pulling away. "See, I knew it. I knew I'd ruin it if I told you. Serena, listen, you have to believe me. I would rather be your friend than lose you because of this stupid crush, okay, I promise. I'll take it all back, okay? I take it back, so you don't have to worry or feel awkward or anything."

She smiled.

"You're... You're smiling. I mean, are you gonna say anything?" Calem said, exasperated. "Please say something."

"I already told you, I love you, too," she said.

"Yeah... Right, but you don't mean it the way I mean it."

"Don't I?"

He stared at her, confused and growing progressively redder in the face. His heartstrings were swirling about him wildly now, and Klefki was so excited that he began orbiting around Calem's shoulders to ride their current.

"I mean...do you?" he asked.

Serena laughed and closed the distance between them. She pressed her lips to his and threw her arms around his neck. Calem was so surprised that he gasped, and Serena dug her fingers into his thick black hair under his beanie.

"I've been waiting for you to finally say something," she said against him.

Calem stared at her open-mouthed and red in the face. "You *knew*?"

"I can see your heartstrings," she said, tracing them with her fingers. "*Heart*strings, as in, from the heart. I knew before you did."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Emotions are personal," she said. "You weren't ready to accept them, and it wouldn't have been right to push you. I knew how I felt about you for a long time, but I wanted to wait until you were sure, too."

"So you're telling me we could've made out, like, a year ago? Two years? And you didn't *tell* me?" Calem said.

Serena laughed again and hugged him closer. This time he returned her embrace and gripped the back of her jacket. "You're such a dork."

"But you love me," he said, holding her close.

"Yeah, I do."

"Tell me again." He ran his hand under her jacket and pressed his palm to the small of her back.

"I love you, dork," she said.

He kissed her back, and she smiled into it. He lifted her off the ground like she weighed nothing and twirled her around, and soon they were laughing until their cheeks hurt.

"So, Calem, what will you do now?" Grace asked later that night when they were finishing up dinner. "I'm sure your parents are happy to

have you back."

"They are," Calem said. "I'll stay in Lumiose for a little bit with them, but there's something I've been thinking about doing, now that you mention it."

"Oh, really? What's that?"

"I don't know if you remember, but the last time I was here before, well, you know..." He trailed off awkwardly. "I mentioned that I'd always wanted to meet Steven Stone."

"That Steel Adamantine, I remember. From Hoenn?" Grace said.

Calem looked surprised. "Yeah, that's right. He's the Champion of Hoenn."

"Well, I imagine he must be *in* Hoenn, then," Grace said. "That's pretty far away from here."

"Yeah, I know. But Alain said he met him a while back, and it got me thinking. I could really learn a lot from him. I mean, a lot's happened and Aegislash and I have come a long way, but I know I'm nowhere near where I want to be after... So, I thought, I don't know, maybe I'll see if he's taking on students or something. I know it's a long shot..."

Grace smiled. "I think it's a great idea, Calem."

"You do?"

"If it's what you really want to do, then do it. This Steven Stone may have a fancy title, but I doubt he's ever fought an army of Mega Pokémon. Maybe you could teach him a thing or two."

Floette was still shy around Calem, but she peeked out from behind Grace's elbow and stared at him, and Grace scooped her up in her palm.

"I think it's a great idea, too," Serena said. "When do we leave?"

"We?" Grace and Calem said together.

"Yeah, duh," Serena said. "Unless you don't want me to come?"

"N-No, of course I want you to come!" Calem said. "I just thought you'd want to stay here after everything... You'd really come with me?"

"I thought you didn't want to lose me," Serena said. "So don't. I want to go."

"Then you should go," Grace said. "Both of you."

Serena looked at Grace. "Mom?"

"I know you, Serena. You want adventure and to see the world, you always have ever since you came back from the woods that night. And I'm done trying to stand in the way of that. Maybe if you go out there and meet this Steven Stone or whoever else, you'll find out more about yourself and who you want to be. But whatever you decide to become, you'll be great. You're my daughter, after all. I only want you to be happy."

"Mom, I...don't know what to say."

"Say you'll write to me."

Serena nodded. "All the time."

"And say you'll train your Pokémon and get stronger. I'm going to do the same with Floette and the others while you're gone. Trevor and I can be students together," Grace said. "Rhyhorn might not be too thrilled about it, but he's a Pokémon, after all. If I can learn, so can he."

Serena could never had imagined in her wildest dreams that Grace would support her in this way. She was the same woman who had been convinced that Serena had to follow in her footsteps as a Rhyhorn racer for so many years, the same Grace who had been afraid of her own daughter, who had looked at Serena like she didn't even know her.

I was so wrong about her, Serena realized. *I was wrong about so much.*

"Thanks, Mom," she said, taking Grace's hand in hers. "I won't let you down."

"I know you won't, sweetie. And neither will you, Calem."

They set sail a few weeks after that out of Cyllage City. Sycamore, Calem's parents, Grace, and even Trevor and his family showed up to see them off. Trevor had a plump Pikachu with him that Sycamore had helped him catch, and he was living up to his promise to learn how to be a great Pokémon trainer one day. Parting was bittersweet as

Serena said her goodbyes to everyone, but somewhere across the sea lay new adventures just waiting for her. And maybe somewhere along the way, she'd even meet another Magus. Who knew? If Xerneas had chosen her, who was to say it hadn't chosen others, too?

But even if she was the last Magus, she was not alone. Calem took her hand in his, and Kelfki jingled happily, his newest golden key shining in the morning sunlight. Darumaka pawed at her pant leg, wanting to be picked up, so Serena scooped him up and set him on the deck railing as she and Calem waved goodbye to their friends and families and the ship pulled out of the dock.

"Are you nervous?" she asked Calem. "They say you should never meet your heroes."

"A little," Calem admitted. "But they also say it's the journey that counts, not the destination."

Serena grinned. "Then here's to the journey." She kissed his cheek.

"Yeah," Calem said, pulling her close by her waist. "Here's to a new journey with you."

Serena laughed as he kissed her and ran his fingers through her long honey hair.

The moon and stars were bright over the Shalour Bay as Alain sipped a cold beer and lay next to Korrina on a recliner on the porch. Tyrantrum was chewing on his dinner, some mangled remains of a Tauros he'd run down earlier in the day and dragged all the way here through part of Shalour City, much to the townspeople's shock and horror. There was really no getting used to the enormous dino-Dragon, Alain supposed. Charizard and Korrina's Blaziken were not winning any awards for best friends of the year, but they were blessedly docile as they sat just a few feet apart around the smoldering remains of a beach bonfire that had been erected in honor of Korrina's and Alain's returns to the Gym in one piece. They'd had a barbecue, and Mairin, who had decided to reconcile and stick with Alain after all, had been dazzled by all the festivities. She was a hit with the Gym trainers, especially Gurkinn, who doted on her like a grandfather. Mairin had declared that she wanted Chespin to train with the Bellators here at the Gym, just like Alain and Charizard had, and one day maybe Chespin would evolve and become a Chesnaught so he could fight like the best of them. It was good for her to have such big

dreams, and Alain had not realized how much he missed having her around. She always seemed to see the best in things, the best in him.

"So, how long can I expect to keep you here this time?" Korrina said as she shifted in his arms under the blanket they shared. It was late, well past midnight, and most people had gone to bed except for the two of them.

Alain considered a moment. "I've been wandering a long time, most of my life," he said. "So I thought maybe...I'll stay here."

Korrina sat up and took his beer away. "What?"

"Mairin likes it here, and I guess I could be persuaded to stay with a little incentive..."

His smile betrayed him, and Korrina shoved him lightly. "Ass. You *better* stay."

"If you and Gurkinn'll have me," he said. "I told Professor Sycamore I'd go back to doing field work for him, but I could use a home base in between missions."

Korrina kissed him lightly. "Of course we'll have you."

They lay together a while longer enjoying the cool night and each other. It was hard to believe everything they had gone through lately, and even harder to believe they'd made it out alive and together. Maybe things were looking up, just a little.

"There's still Team Flare and Lysandre," Korrina said. "They were never implicated in what happened to Trevor and Serena. Are you okay with that?"

"No," Alain admitted. "But that's tomorrow's fight. Right now, I just want to lie here drinking a beer with you and watch the stars."

Korrina laughed. "The stars? I thought we were watching Tyrantrum get his Jurassic Park on with that, uh, whatever he's eating."

"You know, I'm basically desensitized to his eating habits now. What does that say about me?"

Korrina got up to get them fresh beers after a while, and Alain was lost in thought. No matter how much time passed, he could not stop thinking about Malva and their battle, or about how Serena had put a

stop to it. Malva had escaped in the end because of Serena, and she was probably still out there now. Sycamore had told him that Gym Leader Clemont had personally led a manhunt for her when there was a rumor that she'd returned to Lumiose City, but so far the manhunt had turned up no sign of her. The rumors said she'd had help escaping from a powerful Syreni, but no one knew who he was or how he knew Malva. Just another pawn in her arsenal, Alain figured.

"If you keep frowning like that, people will think you're constipated," Korrina said when she noticed him deep in his troubled thoughts.

Alain didn't respond to her teasing and instead said, "I was just thinking about Malva."

"Want to talk about it?" she said.

He shook his head, thinking. "It's just something Serena said to me about her. Remember I told you Serena stopped our fight?"

"Yeah, she broke your Titan control. Who knew a Magus had that kind of power? No wonder your kind was so afraid of them back in the day," Korrina said.

"Yeah. But Serena said she let Malva go because she was a good person. And the last thing Malva said to her was an apology. I don't know, I just can't stop thinking about it. Like, maybe I'm missing something. She was so angry about Laevus, really defensive, and then Serena..."

There was no way Malva was a good person, no matter what Serena said. Intentions could not absolve actions taken, and the fact was that Malva had kidnapped Serena and Trevor, left Calem horribly disfigured, and committed many and more atrocities in her time. And yet, Serena had always had a knack for seeing the truth in people, not just because of her Magus abilities, but because it was in her nature. Some people simply took the time to listen to others, to see through their eyes when everybody else was too impatient or self-absorbed or indifferent even to try. When it came to Malva, how could what Alain knew and what Serena knew ever be reconciled?

"You said she used to have a Mega Houndoom, right?" Korrina said. "And he died the last time you fought her?"

"Yeah," Alain said. "Why?"

Korrina was pensive as she thought about her words. "I've been

thinking about that a lot lately after what happened to Lucario."

Alain cringed. Idiot, of course that was what Korrina was thinking about. She hadn't talked about Lucario much since he'd died, but Alain could tell that a piece of Korrina had died with him in that cave. He could not imagine what it would be like to feel Mega Charizard's life slip away as though it was his own life, helpless to stop it. Alain ran his fingers through Korrina's loose blonde hair lightly.

"Korrina, I'm so sorry," he said, contrite.

She was eerily calm. "I felt him go," she said softly. "Like it was me dying, but I was watching it happen, like an out of body experience. And all I could think about was that it should've been me. He wasn't supposed to be alone; that's not how Mega Evolution works. It's supposed to be two souls bonded as one, in life and in death."

Alain had no words. Nothing he could say would ever make it right. He kissed her temple and let her collect her thoughts and feelings.

"And then I realized what happened," Korrina said, fighting the hitch in her voice. "Lucario broke our bond so he wouldn't drag me down with him. He made a choice to save my life at the expense of his own. And then I thought, maybe Houndoom made the same choice for Malva."

"No way, not Malva. You weren't there. I remember how she smiled at me even as Houndoom was dying, like she knew it wouldn't be the end," Alain argued.

"Is it really so hard to believe that Malva felt for Houndoom what I felt for Lucario? What you feel for Charizard? I don't know, but maybe what Serena saw in her was real. Maybe there's more to it than we know. Mega Evolution... It's not a bond you can just throw away or squander, no matter who you are. Even if you're someone like Malva."

Alain wondered about that. Malva's apology to Serena haunted his dreams, just as her cruel smile when they last fought used to. Were they really the same person? Maybe even Malva herself didn't know.

"If I ever see her again, I'll ask her," he said.

"You think she's really still lost out there somewhere?"

Maybe Malva was trying to figure it out, wherever she was. Serena had given her a second chance, just as Korrina had given him his.

"Not lost, no," Alain said. "Just...wandering."

Korrina lay back against his chest, and he held her close against him. He took a drink and stared up at the stars, stars that maybe right now, somewhere in the world, Malva was looking at, too. A wanderer, like he had once been, searching for something real to hold on to.

The excavation took weeks, and the weather exacerbated the timeline. The lead structural engineer on the excavation team had informed Lysandre that a full excavation of the White Mountains base would take months; it would be best to wait for spring, when the storms subsided. But Lysandre pushed ahead with the project. Access to even a portion of the base could get him the answers he so desperately needed.

Part of the subterranean lab had been cleared, and Lysandre, dressed warmly in red and white mountaineering gear, made his way carefully over the rubble with Pyroar in tow to lend his glow to the dark cavern. The excavation team had Onix and Excadrill working to clear the collapsed base, and he could hear them working deeper underground. Pyroar snarled at the sounds they made and stalked silently beside Lysandre, alert to danger.

A child-like woman in a cutesy red and black snow suit, slicked orange hair, and a special eye scope was scanning the ground. When she spoke, her cold monotone betrayed her Lolita-inspired appearance. "No traces of the Mega Stone shards Laevus stole," she reported as she continued to scan the rubble.

That was not the report Lysandre wanted to hear. "Keep searching, Aliana. I must recover all seven of them before those fools in Snowbelle decide to start sniffing around."

"Understood," Aliana said.

She had a Mightyena with her nose to the ground, too, sniffing around for anything out of the ordinary. Pyroar's steely blue eyes followed her closely, as though waiting for an opportunity to sink his jaws into the big black canine. With Laevus defected and likely dead somewhere beneath all this rubble, Aliana was one of Lysandre's most qualified scientists working with the monolith and Mega Stones, despite appearances. She was ruthless in her pursuit of the truth and had flexible ethics when it came to scientific progress. She was perfect for her job, and Lysandre was counting on her not to fuck up when so

much was riding on the line.

"Sir, I need to brief you on our progress with Project Z," Aliana said as they wandered slowly deeper into the cavern. "I would prefer to do so now instead of later to save time. Is this agreeable to you?"

"Fine," Lysandre said.

"Understood. As you know, Mairin's Chespin is no longer under our care."

"I'm aware," Lysandre said. "He woke up, as I understand it."

"Yes, but I find it very unlikely that he woke up on his own. He was poisoned by the Z2 Core. The reaction was similar to when we experimented with the Z2 Core and the monolith. The four scientists who were handling the experiment were poisoned, and two have already died."

"What's your point?" Lysandre said.

"That for that Chespin to wake up is an anomaly, a scientific impossibility."

"You're saying you think something was done to him to wake him up? The girl Mairin was a thrall, a nobody. She couldn't have done a thing to help him."

"Then someone else who had contact with the Chespin," Alaina reasoned. "I understand that Alain returned for Mairin."

"Alain is a nothing but an uncultured brute with an ego the size of the monolith itself," Lysandre said.

"It must have been someone."

Lysandre thought about that. "And if it was, what are you suggesting?"

"That whoever or whatever cured Chespin of the poisoning could be useful in our experiments with the Z2 Core and the monolith. And if not, then we have an interest in eliminating the threat to the project."

Lysandre chuckled. That was what he liked about Aliana. There was never any bullshit with her; she simply got to the point and stuck it in you without hesitation. And she made a compelling case.

"I'll look into it when we return to Lumiose City," Lysandre said. "If

Project Z is in any danger of being compromised, I want whoever's responsible silenced as soon as possible."

"Understood."

Mightyena had stopped and begun to circle around a patch of rubble, and Aliana scanned the spot with her scope.

"What is it?" Lysandre said. "One of the Mega Stones Laevus stole?"

"No, sir, I'm not getting any readings," Aliana said. "But it might be a body."

"Dig it up."

Mightyena began to claw at the rubble furiously while Pyroar watched, uninterested in soiling his regal paws like some dog. But as Mightyena dug the hole deeper, Pyroar caught a stench of something putrid and bared his teeth in a snarl. Mightyena must have smelled the same offending odor and snapped at the small hole she'd dug. Lysandre swore and got down on one knee to clear the rubble himself. Aliana could not be bothered to soil her designer snow suit.

Lysandre did not have long to dig when something black poked through the rubble. At first he did not recognize it for what it was, and the smell was so rotten and rancid that he flinched. Even Pyroar did not dare to get too close.

"What is that?" Aliana asked.

Lysandre covered his mouth and nose with a hand. "A human hand," he said. "Or, what used to be."

"That's not frostbite," Aliana said, removing her scanner to look directly at the exposed flesh. Ever the curious scientist, she produced a scalpel and an airtight plastic tube, cut into the flesh, and took a sample. She was visibly surprised to find that it bled, thick and black and oozing as though the person it belonged to had died only very recently.

"That's abnormal," she said. "The blood should have frozen. At the very least, after so many weeks buried, the body should not bleed like this."

Lysandre grew suspicious. "I want it dug up."

And so, a couple hours later, the excavation team rerouted some of their bulky Ground-type Pokémon to carefully exhume the body Mightyena had found. While they waited, Aliana did her best to analyze the tissue sample she'd scraped from the corpse using a X-Transceiver computer she carried on her person.

"That's strange," she said.

"What?" Lysandre said.

"The data isn't recognizing the sample I took as human. There must be something wrong with the device." She fiddled with it, but could not find anything ostensibly wrong with it.

"What is it reading as?" Lysandre demanded.

"No, it must be a mistake."

"Aliana, tell me what you've discovered."

Aliana squared her shoulders. "The data seems to think this sample is from Pokémon."

"Which one?"

"Not one," Aliana clarified. "Multiple. I'm getting DNA readings from Lopunny, Pinsir, and Swampert, among others."

Lysandre frowned. "Your X-Transceiver isn't functioning, clearly."

Aliana nodded. "Yes, of course. I'll have the sample analyzed properly when I return to Lumiose City."

By then, the workers had managed to dig out most of the body through careful excavation with the help of a couple Drillbur and Geodude. The body was smashed and mangled beyond recognition due to the cave-in, but Aliana put on her scope to scan it again.

"This is very odd," she said. "I'm not getting any readings, but look here, sir. These appear to be Mega Stones. Here, in the arm. There are three."

Lysandre saw what had caught her eye under the soiled and tattered sleeve of a parka. They were caked in oozing black blood that inexplicably hadn't congealed, and they were black as pitch. Aliana used her tools to remove one of the shards and rinsed the blood off to examine it.

"Aha," she said. "It's faint, but I'm getting a reading now. The corpse was blocking the radiation from it, but this is a Mega Stone. It's been severely damaged."

"Check the rest of the corpse. There were seven stolen from me," Lysandre ordered. "I would wager a guess that this is Laevus. It appears he got what was coming to him."

Even so, Lysandre studied the smashed oozing ruin that had been Laevus's face and had to force himself not to look away. It was a terrible way to go, even for a man such as him.

Aliana managed to recover six of the seven Mega Stones Laevus had stolen, all of which he had embedded in his forearms for reasons unknown. Lysandre ordered the excavation to continue in search of the seventh Mega Stone, but he and Aliana retreated with plans to return to Lumiose City with Laevus's corpse for her and the rest of her team to study.

It was not until several weeks later, when Aliana and her colleagues were in the midst of a full-body autopsy on Laevus's remains, that Lysandre was notified of more artifacts recovered from the collapsed mountain lab. Vials of blood had been locked away in an iron safe and spared a crushing fate. More bodies were discovered, including a few identified as the assault team Lysandre had sent in pursuit of Malva. And finally, a pocket recorder that had been smashed. The tape within, however, had manage to survive intact. Lysandre played it back in the privacy of his office late that night as he sat with Pyroar at his feet in the dark. He recognized Laevus's voice in the grainy recording; the man had been fond of keeping audio diaries, having adored the sound of his own voice. Lysandre listened with disdain, tempted to smash the tape out of spite.

He stole from me and betrayed me. I hope his death was as painful as it was gruesome.

But as Lysandre poured himself a glass of expensive scotch and moved to stand by the hearth, a new entry in Laevus's recordings caught his interest.

"*I've injected the Magus blood into my bloodstream. It's been...seventy-four seconds and counting. No reaction so far,"* the recording said.

Lysandre frowned. Had he heard that right? Did he say 'Magus', as in the extinct Fairy Tamers of old? It must have been a mistake. Laevus had been eccentric, some might even say obsessive.

"*My hypothesis may be correct,*" Laevus's voice continued. *"Only a skuff with Tamer's blood can accept the Mega Stone favorably. Now, to test it."*

"What?" Lysandre said, crossing the room in a few long strides to stand over the speaker.

Did he just say...?

"*I'll test the Mega Stone's power now. Test Subject B47-R, Pinsir. Here I go."*

There was a commotion in the background of the recording after a few minutes. Laevus was panting, he sounded afraid. There was another sound, something droning like an engine, or a loud fan. Or wings.

He had a Pinsir. Is it possible...?

Laevus's laughter cut through the static and droning in the recording, hysterical, and the tape cut. Lysandre stood over the speakers, now playing nothing but faint static. The glass he'd been holding was forgotten on the floor, shattered when he dropped it without realizing it.

"No," Lysandre said, barely a whisper. "No, he couldn't have figured out a way..."

Laevus had been brilliant, and he was obsessed with the monolith. *A giant Mega Stone*. Lysandre's throat was dry as his thoughts raced, and suddenly his feet were carrying him to the elevator that descended all the way to the bowels of the Team Flare headquarters, the secret labs. There was no one here at this late hour, and he and Pyroar made their way quickly through the labs to a private wing that required the highest security clearance, granted only to Lysandre's top scientists.

Within the sealed lab room was a large tank illuminated in bright green light. Within floated a tiny worm-like organism, the creature dubbed the Z2 Core. It was no bigger than the palm of Lysandre's hand, but it was the key part of Zygarde, a Guardian Pokémon long thought to be nothing but myth and legend. The tank kept it sealed away for the safety of the lab scientists while they studied its properties and tried to find a way to force it to grow and assume the form recorded in ancient texts passed down in Lysandre's family, the royal House of Fleur-de-Lis. They spoke of a Guardian of the earth who appeared during a time of great strife to protect the land of Kalos from a devastating war waged between man and Pokémon before they destroyed it. Lysandre had gone to great lengths to safeguard the

histories, lest they fall into hands other than his.

But it was not the Z2 Core he came to see, but the victims it had claimed. Somehow, when it came into contact with the monolith, it had absorbed enough energy to transform into a new form, a great wolf that attacked some of the Team Flare lab techs tending to it and poisoned them. Aliana and her team deduced that it was some kind of radiation poisoning, undetectable to most modern technology and incurable. Mairin's Chespin had fallen victim to the same radiation poisoning when the creature nearly escaped, but it burned through its stolen energy before it could get far, and Aliana's team had successfully recaptured it and placed it in this solitary tank. Its victims, two of whom still lived, barely, were also contained in special tanks for observation.

Lysandre approached the first one, a voluptuous woman named Celosia, and drew out one of the blood vials recovered from Laevus's labs from his pocket. He eyed it suspiciously, daring to wonder.

Could it be true?

He was a descendent of the House of Fleur-de-Lis, the Magi of old Kalos chosen by Xerneas itself 3,000 years ago. Their blood made him a skuff, or something close to it. But...what if he could become like them? By rights, he was a king, just as they had been. And by rights, he could become a Magus, too. It had been his dream as a child when his mother told him the tales, great kings and queens, the Magi who smashed the Fafnir Dynasty when they came to this land and even held the darkness of the Reapers at bay.

What the hell.

He downed the blood in a couple swallows, cringing at the metallic taste. It took everything he had not to throw it back up. All the while, he could feel the Z2 Core's eyes on him, beady and slimy like a fish. It was useless in that form, weaker than a Goomy, but it did not fear him. Lysandre could see its defiance, a simpering little thing who nonetheless thought him no threat at all.

The seconds ticked by and nothing happened. Lysandre bared his teeth, disappointed with himself for even daring to believe something so ludicrous. He was about to leave her when he saw it.

Shadows given light, wormy and blood-red, rose off Celosia's body like smoke and writhed as though in pain. He leaned against the glass, and when he caught sight of his own hands, he gasped. They, too, were

enveloped in swirling threads of light, white with the faintest traces of pink. The pink light bled into the white until it pulse brightly. And when he looked up at the Z2 Core still watching him, he saw its light, too. Bloody red, smoky, like the blight smothering Celosia. Even Pyroar glowed as orange threads of brilliant warm light swirled around him, life given sentience.

Heartstrings, his mother had called the magical sight the Magi possessed. *They can see the light that gives us life. Is it this?*

Below the writing blight plaguing Celosia, he could make out the faintest traces of her heartstrings, fighting for air. Lysandre opened the case and reached for them. The wormy heartstrings burned his hands and drank his blood as they opened gashes in his hands, but he persisted, parting them until he could reach Celosia's faint heartstrings beneath. He thought his hands would spontaneously combust at any moment, but he managed somehow to scoop out the blighted heartstrings, the poison the Z2 Core had infected Celosia with, and they pittered out with nothing left to feed on.

Celosia's body seized, and Lysandre loomed over her, entranced. She dug her nails into her palms, drawing blood. Her dyed purple hair, blonde at the roots that had grown out a couple inches in her time comatose in this tank, seemed to stand on end. And then she fell still. Lysandre withdrew his hands, bloody and stinging, and wrapped them in a handkerchief he kept on his person.

After a moment, Celosia stirred, and Lysandre could not believe his eyes.

"What," Celosia said, her voice groggy and slurred. "Where am I?"

Lysandre ignored her, his thoughts racing. *Magus blood. You found a living Magus, didn't you?*

That girl Augustine and the thrall woman had been searching for. The one Malva had kidnapped. The one who cured Mairin's Chespin, just as he had now cured Celosia.

"Serena," Lysandre said. "Could she really be..."

Could I *really be...*

Celosia was staring to come to. "Lysandre? Is that you? What happened?"

Her blood, and the Mega Stones...

"Celosia, get up. You've slept long enough," he said.

He went to the other tank where the other scientist, a fleshy lab tech named Derik, lay comatose, afflicted with the same ailment. The ailment for which Lysandre now had a cure. He could see the smoking heartstrings as they consumed Derik, but the effects of Serena's blood were wearing off. They began to fade, and with them Lysandre's enhanced sight. His own heartstrings faded from pink to faint white as the Magus powers abandoned him, and soon he couldn't see them at all.

I'm no Magus, he thought, frustrated. *But I should be.*

Derik was a lab tech where Celosia was a brilliant researcher, and Lysandre only had a limited supply of the Magus blood. He punched a few buttons on the computer that powered the tank, cut off the flow of oxygen, and shut it down. Derik would suffocate in a matter of minutes, peacefully and quietly. No waste.

"Ah," Celosia said. "My head... The last thing I remember is..." She looked around and spotted the Z2 Core peering at her through the glass of its tank. "That *thing* did this!"

"Yes, and Aliana locked it away so it won't happen again. Go get yourself cleaned up, Celosia," Lysandre said, leaving the lab with Pyroar in tow. "We have a lot of work to do, and Aliana will need you."

Celosia groaned. "Work? On what?"

Mega Evolution, Zygarde, the Magi... And my legacy.

"Many things," Lysandre said. "I'm going to change this filthy world."

The End

So apparently I didn't get that memo about epilogues needing to be short...

Thank you everyone for sticking with this fic, and thank you especially to XxSer3ndipityxX for requesting this fic in the first place. I may never have considered doing it if not for your input and encouragement.

As to the ending, yes, there's clearly some room for a sequel, but as of the

original posting of this update, I have no concrete plans to pursue one. The reason for this is that I wanted the ending to tie into the endings of the Mega Evolution Specials as well as the events of the anime involving Zygarde. Yeah, it's a little different here for various reasons, but the whole deal with Team Flare having a Zygarde Core and Lysandre pursuing Mega Evolution and eventually going after Xerneas/Yveltal can and should be read into this. This isn't to say I'll never revisit this story (because I feel like Zygarde in particular got shafted in the games and there totally should have been a Pokémon Z version), and I wanted to leave that possibility open even if I'm not currently working on anything. If there's enough demand, I might reconsider in the future, but it's really all up in the air right now.

That being said, I hope you'll all stick around for future fics in Alola and possibly Hoenn, where Malva/Siebold and Serena/Calem will make some appearances, respectively. Because Wanderer takes place in the Tamerverse, where all my Pokémon fics exist, the events herein will impact other stories. Liminals, for example, will appear in future projects, and this is not the last we've seen of the Magi by any means. If you like this universe and my writing, I encourage you to check out the other Pokémon fics I'm working on. Chances are you'll find something in them that you might like, too!

Lastly but certainly not least, thank you so much to all the reviewers who stuck with me through this, for all your encouragement and enthusiasm and feedback. You guys are the reason fics get finished, and that's not an exaggeration by any means. Anyone who started reading this as I first started posting will remember the long lapses in updates I had, which were due in large part to dwindling motivation. The reviewers are the reason I always came back to this, and I'm glad I did. I loved writing this story, and I hope all of you loved reading it. It really is the journey, not the destination. Until the next great adventure in the Tamerverse!